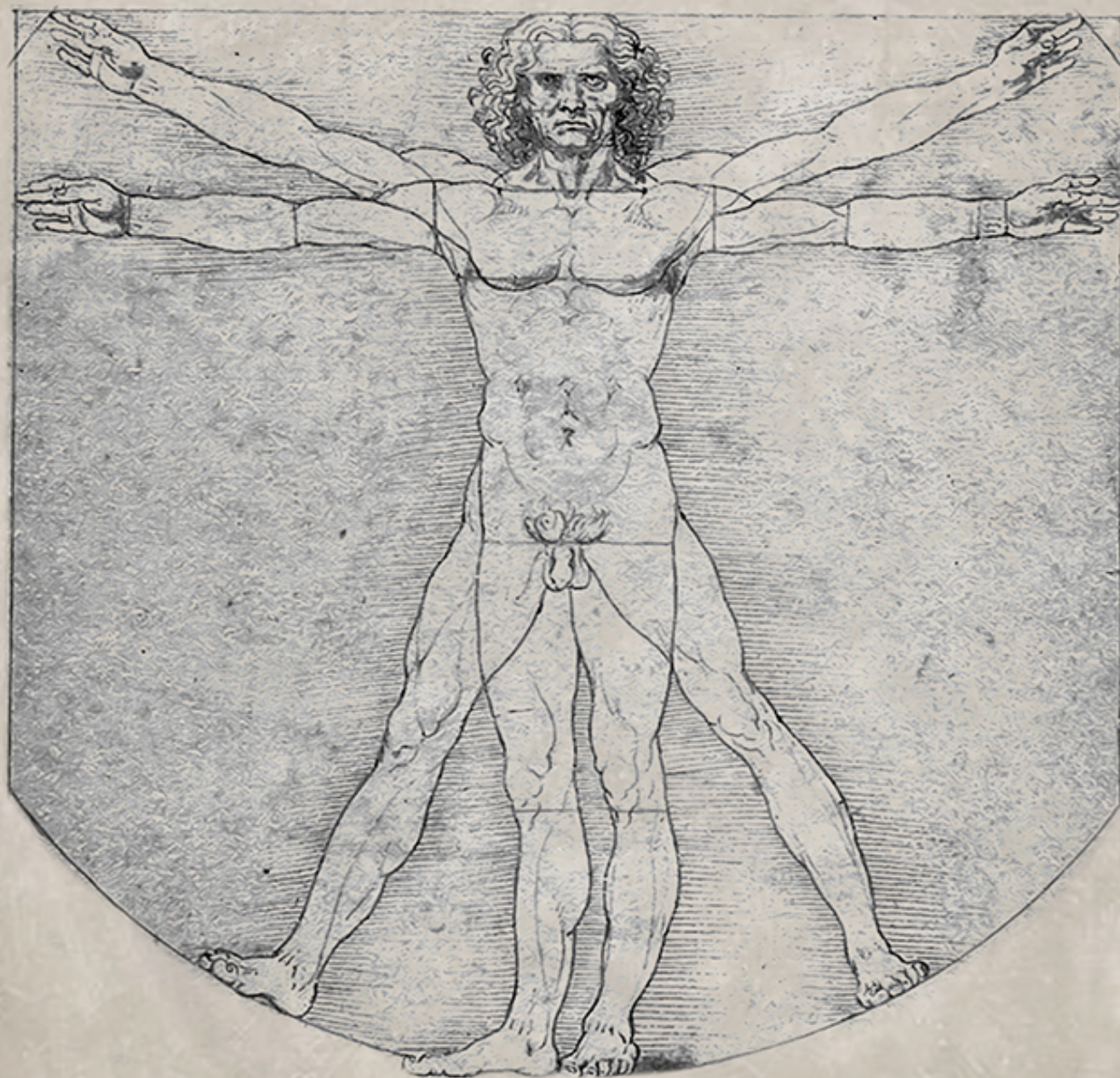


CLASSICS TO GO



**THE SALVAGING
OF CIVILIZATION**

H. G. WELLS

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I

THE PROBABLE FUTURE OF MANKIND

1

The present outlook of human affairs is one that admits of broad generalizations and that seems to require broad generalizations. We are in one of those phases of experience which become cardinal in history. A series of immense and tragic events have shattered the self-complacency and challenged the will and intelligence of mankind. That easy general forward movement of human affairs which for several generations had seemed to justify the persuasion of a necessary and invincible progress, progress towards greater powers, greater happiness, and a continual enlargement of life, has been checked violently and perhaps arrested altogether. The spectacular catastrophe of the Great War has revealed an accumulation of destructive forces in our outwardly prosperous society, of which few of us had dreamt; and it has also revealed a profound incapacity to deal with and restrain these forces. The two years of want, confusion, and indecision that have followed the Great War in Europe and Asia, and the uncertainties that have disturbed life even in the comparatively untouched American world, seem to many watchful minds even more ominous to our social order than the war itself. What is happening to our race? they ask. Did the prosperities and confident hopes with which the twentieth century opened, mark nothing more than a culmination of fortuitous good luck? Has the cycle of prosperity and progress closed? To what will this staggering and blundering, the hatreds and mischievous adventures of

the present time, bring us? Is the world in the opening of long centuries of confusion and disaster such as ended the Western Roman Empire in Europe or the Han prosperity in China? And if so, will the debacle extend to America? Or is the American (and Pacific?) system still sufficiently removed and still sufficiently autonomous to maintain a progressive movement of its own if the Old World collapse?

Some sort of answer to these questions, vast and vague though they are, we must each one of us have before we can take an intelligent interest or cast an effective vote in foreign affairs. Even though a man formulate no definite answer, he must still have an implicit persuasion before he can act in these matters. If he have no clear conclusions openly arrived at, then he must act upon subconscious conclusions instinctively arrived at. Far better is it that he should bring them into the open light of thought.

The suppression of war is generally regarded as central to the complex of contemporary problems. But war is not a new thing in human experience, and for scores of centuries mankind has managed to get along in spite of its frequent recurrence. Most states and empires have been intermittently at war throughout their periods of stability and prosperity. But their warfare was not the warfare of the present time. The thing that has brought the rush of progressive development of the past century and a half to a sudden shock of arrest is not the old and familiar warfare, but warfare strangely changed and exaggerated by novel conditions. It is this change in conditions, therefore, and not war itself, which is the reality we have to analyse in its bearing upon our social and political ideas. In 1914 the European Great Powers resorted to war, as they had resorted to war on many previous occasions, to decide certain open issues. This war flamed out with an unexpected rapidity until all the world was involved; and it developed a

horror, a monstrosity of destructiveness, and, above all, an inconclusiveness quite unlike any preceding war. That unlikeness was the essence of the matter. Whatever justifications could be found for its use in the past, it became clear to many minds that under the new conditions war was no longer a possible method of international dealing. The thing lay upon the surface. The idea of a League of Nations sustaining a Supreme World Court to supersede the arbitrament of war, did not so much arise at any particular point as break out simultaneously wherever there were intelligent men.

Now what was this change in conditions that had confronted mankind with the perplexing necessity of abandoning war? For perplexing it certainly is. War has been a ruling and constructive idea in all human societies up to the present time; few will be found to deny it. Political institutions have very largely developed in relation to the idea of war; defence and aggression have shaped the outer form of every state in the world, just as co-operation sustained by compulsion has shaped its inner organization. And if abruptly man determines to give up the waging of war, he may find that this determination involves the most extensive and penetrating modifications of political and social conceptions that do not at the first glance betray any direct connection with belligerent activities at all.

It is to the general problem arising out of this consideration, that this and the three following essays will be addressed; the question: What else has to go if war is to go out of human life? and the problem of what has to be done if it is to be banished and barred out for ever from the future experiences of our race. For let us face the truth in this matter; the abolition of war is no casting of ancient, barbaric, and now obsolete traditions, no easy and natural progressive step; the abolition of war, if it can be brought

about, will be a reversal not only of the general method of human life hitherto but of the general method of nature, the method, that is, of conflict and survival. It will be a new phase in the history of life, and not simply an incident in the history of man. These brief essays will attempt to present something like the true dimensions of the task before mankind if war is indeed to be superseded, and to show that the project of abolishing war by the occasional meeting of some Council of a League of Nations or the like, is, in itself, about as likely to succeed as a proposal to abolish thirst, hunger, and death by a short legislative act.

Let us first examine the change in the conditions of human life that has altered war from a normal aspect of the conflict for existence of human societies into a terror and a threat for the entire species. The change is essentially a change in the amount of power available for human purposes, and more particularly in the amount of material power that can be controlled by one individual. Human society up to a couple of centuries ago was essentially a man-power and horse-power system. There was in addition a certain limited use of water power and wind power, but that was not on a scale to affect the general truth of the proposition. The first intimation of the great change began seven centuries ago with the appearance of explosives. In the thirteenth century the Mongols made a very effective military use of the Chinese discovery of gunpowder. They conquered most of the known world, and their introduction of a low-grade explosive in warfare rapidly destroyed the immunity of castles and walled cities, abolished knighthood, and utterly wrecked and devastated the irrigation system of Mesopotamia, which had been a populous and civilized region since before the beginnings of history. But the restricted metallurgical knowledge of the time set definite limits to the size and range of cannon. It was only with the nineteenth century that the large scale production of cast

steel and the growth of chemical knowledge made the military use of a variety of explosives practicable. The systematic extension of human power began in the eighteenth century with the utilization of steam and coal. That opened a crescendo of invention and discovery which thrust rapidly increasing quantities of material energy into men's hands. Even now that crescendo may not have reached its climax.

We need not rehearse here the familiar story of the abolition of distance that ensued; how the radiogram and the telegram have made every event of importance a simultaneous event for the minds of everyone in the world, how journeys which formerly took months or weeks now take days or hours, nor how printing and paper have made possible a universally informed community, and so forth. Nor will we describe the effect of these things upon warfare. The point that concerns us here is this, that before this age of discovery communities had fought and struggled with each other much as naughty children might do in a crowded nursery, *within the measure of their strength*. They had hurt and impoverished each other, but they had rarely destroyed each other completely. Their squabbles may have been distressing, but they were tolerable. It is even possible to regard these former wars as healthy, hardening and invigorating conflicts. But into this nursery has come Science, and has put into the fists of these children razor blades with poison on them, bombs of frightful explosive, corrosive fluids and the like. The comparatively harmless conflicts of these infants are suddenly fraught with quite terrific possibilities, and it is only a question of sooner or later before the nursery becomes a heap of corpses or is blown to smithereens. A real nursery invaded by a reckless person distributing such gifts, would be promptly saved by the intervention of the nurse; but humanity has no nurse but its own poor wisdom. And whether that poor wisdom can

rise to the pitch of effectual intervention is the most fundamental problem in mundane affairs at the present time.

The deadly gifts continue. There was a steady increase in the frightfulness and destructiveness of belligerence from 1914 up to the beginning of 1918, when shortage of material and energy checked the process; and since the armistice there has been an industrious development of military science. The next well-organized war, we are assured, will be far more swift and extensive in its destruction—more particularly of the civilian population. Armies will advance no longer along roads but extended in line, with heavy tank transport which will plough up the entire surface of the land they traverse; aerial bombing, with bombs each capable of destroying a small town, will be practicable a thousand miles beyond the military front, and the seas will be swept clear of shipping by mines and submarine activities. There will be no distinction between combatants and non-combatants, because every able-bodied citizen, male or female, is a potential producer of food and munitions; and probably the safest, and certainly the best supplied shelters in the universal cataclysm, will be the carefully buried, sandbagged, and camouflaged general-headquarters of the contending armies. There military gentlemen of limited outlook and high professional training will, in comparative security, achieve destruction beyond their understanding. The hard logic of war which gives victory always to the most energetic and destructive combatant, will turn warfare more and more from mere operations for loot or conquest or predominance into operations for the conclusive destruction of the antagonists. A relentless thrust towards strenuousness is a characteristic of belligerent conditions. War is war, and vehemence is in its nature. You must hit always as hard as you can. Offensive and counter-offensive methods continue to prevail over

merely defensive ones. The victor in the next great war will be bombed from the air, starved, and depleted almost as much as the loser. His victory will be no easy one; it will be a triumph of the exhausted and dying over the dead.

It has been argued that such highly organized and long prepared warfare as the world saw in 1914-18 is not likely to recur again for a considerable time because of the shock inflicted by it upon social stability. There may be spasmodic wars with improvised and scanty supplies, these superficially more hopeful critics admit, but there remain no communities now so stable and so sure of their people as to prepare and wage again a fully elaborated scientific war. But this view implies no happier outlook for mankind. It amounts to this, that so long as men remain disordered and impoverished they will not rise again to the full height of scientific war. But manifestly this will only be for so long as they remain disordered and impoverished. When they recover they will recover to repeat again their former disaster with whatever modern improvements and intensifications the ingenuity of the intervening time may have devised. This new phase of disorder, conflict, and social unravelling upon which we have entered, this phase of decline due to the enhanced and increasing powers for waste and destruction in mankind, is bound, therefore, to continue so long as the divisions based upon ancient ideas of conflict remain; and if for a time the decadence seems to be arrested, it will only be to accumulate under the influence of those ideas a fresh war-storm sufficiently destructive and disorganizing to restore the decadent process.

Unless mankind can readjust its political and social ideas to this essential new fact of its enormously enlarged powers, unless it can eliminate or control its pugnacity, no other prospect seems open to us but decadence, at least to such

a level of barbarism as to lose and forget again all the scientific and industrial achievements of our present age. Then, with its powers shrunken to their former puny scale, our race may recover some sort of balance between the injuries and advantages of conflict. Or, since our decadent species may have less vitality and vigour than it had in its primitive phases, it may dwindle and fade out altogether before some emboldened animal antagonist, or through some world-wide disease brought to it perhaps by rats and dogs and insects and what not, who may be destined to be heirs to the rusting and mouldering ruins of the cities and ports and ways and bridges of to-day.

Only one alternative to some such retrogression seems possible, and that is the conscious, systematic reconstruction of human society to avert it. The world has been brought into one community, and the human mind and will may be able to recognize and adapt itself to this fact—in time. Men, as a race, may succeed in turning their backs upon the method of warfare and the methods of conflict and in embarking upon an immense world-wide effort of co-operation and mutual toleration and salvage. They may have the vigour to abandon their age-long attempt to live in separate sovereign states, and to grapple with and master the now quite destructive force that traditional hostility has become, and bring their affairs together under one law and one peace. These new vast powers over nature which have been given to them, and which will certainly be their destruction if their purposes remain divergent and conflicting, will then be the means by which they may set up a new order of as yet scarcely imaginable interest and happiness and achievement. But is our race capable of such an effort, such a complete reversal of its instinctive and traditional impulses? Can we find premonitions of any such bold and revolutionary adaptations as these, in the mental and political life of to-day? How far are we, reader and

writer, for example, working for these large new securities? Do we even keep them steadfastly in our minds? How is it with the people around us? Are not we and they and all the race still just as much adrift in the current of circumstances as we were before 1914? Without a great effort on our part (or on someone's part) that current which swirled our kind into a sunshine of hope and opportunity for a while will carry our race on surely and inexorably to fresh wars, to shortages, hunger, miseries, and social debacles, at last either to complete extinction or to a degradation beyond our present understanding.

2

The urgent need for a great creative effort has become apparent in the affairs of mankind. It is manifest that unless some unity of purpose can be achieved in the world, unless the ever more violent and disastrous incidence of war can be averted, unless some common control can be imposed on the headlong waste of man's limited inheritance of coal, oil, and moral energy that is now going on, the history of humanity must presently culminate in some sort of disaster, repeating and exaggerating the disaster of the great war, producing chaotic social conditions, and going on thereafter in a degenerative process towards extinction. So much all reasonable men seem now prepared to admit. But upon the question of how and in what form a unity of purpose and a common control of human affairs is to be established, there is still a great and lamentable diversity of opinion and, as a consequence, an enfeeblement and wasteful dispersal of will. At present nothing has been produced but the manifestly quite inadequate League of Nations at Geneva, and a number of generally very vague movements for a world law, world disarmament, and the like, among the intellectuals of the various civilized countries of the world.

The common failings of all these initiatives are a sort of genteel timidity and a defective sense of the scale of the enterprise before us. A neglect of the importance of scale is one of the gravest faults of contemporary education. Because a world-wide political organ is needed, it does not follow that a so-called League of Nations without representative sanctions, military forces, or authority of any kind, a League from which large sections of the world are excluded altogether, is any contribution to that need. People have a way of saying it is better than nothing. But it may be worse than nothing. It may create a feeling of disillusionment about world-unifying efforts. If a mad elephant were loose in one's garden, it would be an excellent thing to give one's gardener a gun. But it would have to be an adequate gun, an elephant gun. To give him a small rook-rifle and tell him it was better than nothing, and encourage him to face the elephant with that in his hand, would be the directest way of getting rid not of the elephant but of the gardener.

It is, if people will but think steadfastly, inconceivable that there should be any world control without a merger of sovereignty, but the framers of these early tentatives towards world unity have lacked the courage of frankness in this respect. They have been afraid of outbreaks of bawling patriotism, and they have tried to believe, and to make others believe, that they contemplate nothing more than a league of nations, when in reality they contemplate a subordination of nations and administrations to one common law and rule. The elementary necessity of giving the council of any world-peace organization which is to be more than a sentimental international gesture, not only a complete knowledge but an effective control of all the military resources and organizations in the world, appalled them. They did not even ask for such a control. The frowning solidity of existing things was too much for them.

They wanted to change them, but when it came to laying hands on them—No! They decided to leave them alone. They wanted a new world—and it is to contain just the same things as the old.

But are these intellectuals right in their estimate of the common man? Is he such a shallow and vehement fool as they seem to believe? Is he so patriotic as they make out? If mankind is to be saved from destruction there must be a world control; a world control means a world government, it is only another name for it, and manifestly that government must have a navy that will supersede the British navy, artillery that will supersede the French artillery, air forces superseding all existing air forces, and so forth. For many flags there must be one sovereign flag; *orbis terrarum*. Unless a world control amounts to that it will be ridiculous, just as a judge supported by two or three unarmed policemen, a newspaper reporter and the court chaplain, proposing to enforce his decisions in a court packed with the heavily armed friends of the plaintiff and defendant would be ridiculous. But the common man is supposed to be so blindly and incurably set upon his British navy or his French army, or whatever his pet national instrument of violence may be, that it is held to be impossible to supersede these beloved and adored forces. If that is so, then a world law is impossible, and the wisest course before us is to snatch such small happiness as we may hope to do and leave the mad elephant to work its will in the garden.

But is it so? If the mass of common men are incurably patriotic and belligerent why is there a note of querulous exhortation in nearly all patriotic literature? Why, for instance, is Mr. Rudyard Kipling's "History of England" so full of goading and scolding? And very significant indeed to any student of the human outlook was the world-response to President Wilson's advocacy of the League of Nations idea,

in its first phase in 1918, before the weakening off and disillusionment of the Versailles Conference. Just for a little while it seemed that President Wilson stood for a new order of things in the world, that he had the wisdom and will and power to break the net of hatreds and nationalisms and diplomacies in which the Old World was entangled. And while he seemed to be capable of that, while he promised most in the way of change and national control, then it was that he found his utmost support in every country in the world. In the latter half of 1918 there was scarcely a country anywhere in which one could not have found men ready to die for President Wilson. A great hopefulness was manifest in the world. It faded, it faded very rapidly again. But that brief wave of enthusiasm, which set minds astir with the same great idea of one peace of justice throughout the earth in China and Bokhara and the Indian bazaars, in Iceland and Basutoland and Ireland and Morocco, was indeed a fact perhaps more memorable in history even than the great war itself. It displayed a possibility of the simultaneous operation of the same general ideas throughout the world quite beyond any previous experience. It demonstrated that the generality of men are as capable of being cosmopolitan and pacifist as they are of being patriotic and belligerent. Both moods are extensions and exaltations beyond the everyday life, which itself is neither one thing nor the other. And both are transitory moods, responses to external suggestion.

It is to that first wave of popular feeling for a world law transcending and moving counter to all contemporary diplomacies, and not to the timid legalism of the framers of the first schemes for a League of Nations that we must look, if we are to hope at all for the establishment of a new order in human affairs. It is upon the spirit of that transitory response to the transitory greatness of President Wilson that we have to seize; we have to lay hold of that, to recall it and

confirm it and enlarge and strengthen it, to make it a flux of patriotisms and a creator of new loyalties and devotions, and out of the dead dust of our present institutions to build up for it and animate with it the body of a true world state.

We have already stated the clear necessity, if mankind is not to perish by the hypertrophy of warfare, for the establishment of an armed and strong world law. Here in this spirit that has already gleamed upon the world is the possible force to create and sustain such a world law. What is it that intervenes between the universal human need and its satisfaction? Why, since there are overwhelming reasons for it and a widespread disposition for it, is there no world-wide creative effort afoot now in which men and women by the million are participating—and participating with all their hearts? Why is it that, except for the weak gestures of the Geneva League of Nations and a little writing of books and articles, a little pamphleteering, some scattered committee activities on the part of people chiefly of the busybody class, an occasional speech and a diminishing volume of talk and allusion, no attempts are apparent to stay the plain drift of human society towards new conflicts and the sluices of final disaster?

The answer to that Why, probes deep into the question of human motives.

It must be because we are all creatures of our immediate surroundings, because our minds and energies are chiefly occupied by the affairs of every day, because we are all chiefly living our own lives, and very few of us, except by a kind of unconscious contribution, the life of mankind. In moments of mental activity, in the study or in contemplation, we may rise to a sense of the dangers and needs of human destiny, but it is only a few minds and characters of prophetic quality that, without elaborate artificial assistance, seem able to keep hold upon and guide