

JOHN DAVYS BERESFORD

H. G. WELLS

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I

INTRODUCTION

THE NORMALITY OF MR WELLS

In his Preface to the *Unpleasant Plays*, Mr Shaw boasts his possession of "normal sight." The adjective is the oculist's, and the application of it is Mr Shaw's, but while the phrase is misleading until it is explained to suit a particular purpose, it has a pleasing adaptability, and I can find none better as a key to the works of Mr H.G. Wells.

We need not bungle over the word "normal," in any attempt to meet the academic objection that it implies conformity to type. In this connection, the gifted possessor of normal sight is differentiated from his million neighbours by the fact that he wears no glasses; and if a few happy people still exist here and there who have no need for the mere physical assistance, the number of those whose mental outlook is undistorted by tradition, prejudice or some form of bias is so small that we regard them as inspired or criminal according to the inclination of our own beloved predilection. And no spectacles will correct the mental astigmatism of the multitude, a fact that is often a cause of considerable annoyance to the possessors of normal sight. That defect of vision, whether congenital or induced by the confinements of early training, persists and increases throughout life, like other forms of myopia. The man who sees a ball as slightly flattened, like a tangerine orange too tightly packed (an "oblate spheroid" would be the physicist's brief description), seeks the society of other men who share his illusion; and the company of them take arms against the opposing faction, which is confirmed in the belief that the ball is egg-shaped, that the bulge, in fact, is not "oblate" but "prolate."

I will not elaborate the parable; it is sufficient to indicate that in my reading of Mr Wells, I have seen him as regarding all life from a reasonable distance. By good fortune he avoided the influences of his early training, which was too ineffectual to leave any permanent mark upon him. His readers may infer, from certain descriptions in *Kipps*, and *The History of Mr Polly*, that Wells himself sincerely regrets the inadequacies of that "private school of dingy aspect and still dingier pretensions, where there were no object lessons, and the studies of book-keeping and French were pursued (but never effectually overtaken) under the guidance of an elderly gentleman, who wore a nondescript gown and took snuff, wrote copperplate, explained nothing, and used a cane with remarkable dexterity and gusto." But, properly considered, that inadequate elderly gentleman may be regarded as our benefactor. If he had been more apt in his methods, he might have influenced the blessed normality of his pupil, and bound upon him the spectacles of his own order. Worse still, Mr Wells might have been born into the leisured classes, and sent to Eton and Christchurch, and if his genius had found any expression after that awful experience, he would probably, at the best, have written polite essays or a history of Napoleon, during the intervals of his leisured activity as a member of the Upper House.

Happily, Fate provided a scheme for preserving his eyesight, and pitched him into the care of Mr and Mrs Joseph Wells on the 21st September 1866; behind or above a small general shop in Bromley. Mrs Wells was the daughter of an innkeeper at Midhurst and had been in service as a lady's maid before her marriage. Joseph Wells had had a more distinguished career. He had been a great Kent bowler in the early sixties, and it must have been, I think, only the year before the subject of our

essay appeared at Bromley that his father took four wickets with consecutive balls and created a new record in the annals of cricket. The late Sir Francis Galton might have made something out of this ancestry; I must confess that it is entirely beyond my powers, although I make the reservation that we know little of the abilities of H.G. Wells' mother. She has not figured as a recognisable portrait in any of his novels.

The Bromley shop, like most of its kind, was a failure. Moderate success might have meant a Grammar School for young Wells, and the temptations of property, but Fate gave our young radical another twist by thrusting him temporarily within sight of an alien and magnificent prosperity, where as the son of the housekeeper at Up Park, near Petersfield, he might recognise his immense separation from the members of the ruling class, as described in *Tono-Bungay*.

After that came "the drapery," first at Windsor and then at Southsea; but we have no autobiography of this period, only the details of the trade and its circumstances. For neither Hoopdriver, nor Kipps, nor Polly could have qualified for the post of assistant at Midhurst Grammar School, a position that H.G. Wells obtained at sixteen after he had broken his indentures with the Southsea draper.

At this point we come up with Mr Lewisham, and may follow him in his experiences after he obtained what was, in fact, a scholarship at the Normal School of Science, South Kensington; but we drop that hero again before his premature marriage and failure, to follow the uncharted course of Wells obtaining his B.Sc. with first-class honours; passing to an assistant-mastership at the Henley House School, St John's Wood, and so coming by way of tutor, lecturer and demonstrator to the beginnings of journalism, to the breaking of a blood-vessel and thence, without further diversion, to the trade of letters, somewhere in the summer of 1893.

I have taken as my text the normality of Mr Wells, on the understanding that I shall define the essential term as I will; and this brief outline of his early experiences may help to show, *inter alia*, that he viewed life from many angles before he was twenty-seven. That he had the capacity so to see life was either a lucky accident or due to some untraceable composition of heredity. That he kept his power was an effect of his casual education. He was fortunate enough to escape training in his observation of the sphere.

Persistent repetition will finally influence the young mind, however gifted, and if Mr Wells had been subject to the discipline of what may be called an efficient education, he might have seen his sphere at the age of twenty-seven as slightly flattened—whether it appeared oblate or prolate is no consequence—and I could not have crowned him with the designation that heads this Introduction.

He is, in fact, normal just in so far as his gift of vision was undistorted by the precepts and dogmas of his parents, teachers and early companions.

II

THE ROMANCES

Mr Wells' romances have little or nothing in common with those of Jules Verne, not even that peculiar quality of romance which revels in the impossible. The heroes of Jules Verne were idealised creatures making use of some wonderful invention for their own purposes; and the future of mankind was of no account in the balance against the lust for adventure under new mechanical conditions. Also, Jules Verne's imagination was at the same time mathematical and Latin; and he was entirely uninfluenced by the writings of Comte.

Mr Wells' experiments with the relatively improbable have become increasingly involved with the social problem, and it would be possible to trace the growth of his opinions from this evidence alone, even if we had not the valuable commentary afforded by his novels and his essays in sociology. But his interest in the present and future welfare of man would not in the first place have prompted him to the writing of romance (unless it had been cast in the severely allegorical form of *The Pilgrim's Progress*), and if we are to account for that ebullition, we shall be driven—like Darwin with his confounding peacock—to take refuge in some theory of exuberance. The later works have been so defensive and, in one sense, didactic that one is apt to forget that many of the earlier books, and all the short stories, must have originated in the effervescence of creative imagination.

Mr Wells must, also, have been slightly intoxicated by the first effects of reaction. A passage from *The Future in America* exhibits him somewhat gleefully reviving thoughts of the prison-house, and I quote it in order to account for his first exercises in prophecy by a study of contrasts. "I remember," he writes, "that to me in my boyhood speculation about the Future was a monstrous joke. Like most people of my generation, I was launched into life with millennial assumptions. This present sort of thing, I believed, was going on for a time, interesting personally, perhaps, but as a whole inconsecutive, and then—it might be in my lifetime or a little after it—there would be trumpets and shoutings and celestial phenomena, a battle of Armageddon, and the Judgment.... To talk about the Man of the year Million was, of course, in the face of this great conviction, a whimsical play of fancy. The year Million was just as impossible, just as gaily nonsensical as fairyland...."

The imprisoning bottle was opened when he became a student of biology, under Huxley, and the liquid of his suppressed thought began to bubble. He prefaced his romances by a sketch in the old *Pall Mall Gazette*, entitled *The Man of the Year Million*, an a priori study that made one thankful for one's prematurity. After that physiological piece of logic, however, he tried another essay in evolution, published in 1895 in book form under the title of *The Time Machine*—the first of his romances.

The machine itself is the vaguest of mechanical assumptions; a thing of ivory, quartz, nickel and brass that quite illogically carries its rider into an existing past or future. We accept the machine as a literary device to give an air of probability to the essential thing, the experience; and forget the means in the effect. The criterion of the prophecy in this case is influenced by the theory of "natural selection." Mr Wells' vision of the "Sunset of Mankind" was of men so nearly adapted to their environment that the need for struggle, with its corollary of the extermination of the unfit, had practically ceased. Humanity had become differentiated into two races, both recessive; one, the Eloi, a race of childlike, simple, delicate creatures living on the surface of a kindly earth; the other, the Morlocks, a more active but debased race, of bestial habits, who lived underground and preyed cannibalistically on the surface-dwellers whom they helped to preserve, as a man may preserve game. The Eloi, according to the hypothesis of the Time Traveller, are the descendants of the leisured classes; the Morlocks of the workers. "The Eloi, like the Carolingian kings, had decayed to a mere beautiful futility. They still possessed the earth on sufferance; since the Morlocks, subterranean for innumerable generations, had come at last to find the day-lit surface intolerable. And the Morlocks

made their garments, I inferred, and maintained them in their habitual needs perhaps through the survival of an old habit of service." All this is in the year 802,701 A.D.

The prophecy is less convincing than the wonderful sight of the declining earth some million years later, sinking slowly into the dying fires of the worn-out sun. Man and the vertebrates have disappeared, and the highest wonder of animal life is represented by giant crustaceans, which in turn give way to a lower form. We have a vision of an involution that shall succeed the highest curve of development; of life ending where it began in the depths of the sea, as the initial energy of the solar system is dissipated and the material of it returns to rest at the temperature of the absolute zero. And the picture is made more horrible to the imaginative by the wonder whether the summit of the evolutionary curve has not already been reached—or it may be passed in the days of the Greek philosophers.

The Time Machine, despite certain obvious faults of imagination and style, is a brilliant fantasy; and it affords a valuable picture of the young Wells looking at the world, with his normal eyes, and finding it, more particularly, incomplete. At the age of twenty-seven or so, he has freed himself very completely from the bonds of conventional thought, and is prepared to examine, and to present life from the detached standpoint of one who views it all from a respectable distance; but who is able, nevertheless—an essential qualification—to enter life with all the passion and generosity of his own humanity.

And in *The Wonderful Visit*—published in the same year as *The Time Machine*—he comes closer to earth. That ardent ornithologist, the Rev. K. Hilyer, Vicar of Siddermouth, who brought down an angel with a shot-gun, is tenderly imagined; a man of gentle mind, for all the limitations of his training. The mortalised angel, on the other hand, is rather a tentative and simple creature. He may represent, perhaps, the rather blank mind of one who sees country society without having had the inestimable privilege of learning how it came about. His temperament was something too childlike—without the child's brutality—to investigate the enormous complexities of adjustment that had brought about the conditions into which he was all too suddenly plunged by a charge of duck-shot. He came and was filled with an inalterable perplexity, but some of his questions were too ingenuous; and while we may sympathise with the awful inertia of Hilyer before the impossible task of explaining the inexplicable differences between mortal precept and mortal practice, we feel that we might, in some cases at least, have made a more determined effort. We might have found some justification for chairs, by way of instance, and certainly an excuse for raising beds above the floor. But the wounded angel, like the metal machine, is only a device whereby the searching examination of our author may be displayed in an engrossing and intimate form. And in *The Wonderful Visit*, that exuberance we postulated, that absorption in the development of idea, is more marked; in the unfolding of the story we can trace the method of the novelist.

Indeed, the three romances that follow discover hardly a trace of the social investigator. *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds* are essays in pure fantasy, and although the first of the three is influenced by biology I class it unhesitatingly among the works of sheer exuberance. Each of these books is, in effect, an answer to some rather whimsical question, and the problem that Dr Moreau attempted to solve was: "Can we, by surgery, so accelerate the evolutionary process as to make man out of a beast in a few days or weeks?" And within limits he found that the answer was: "Yes."

In the seclusion of his island, and with the poor assistance of the outlawed medical student, Montgomery, Dr Moreau succeeded in producing some creditable parodies of humanity by his operations on pigs, bulls, dogs and other animals. These cut and remoulded creatures had something the appearance and intelligence of Homo Sapiens, and could be maintained at that level by the exercise of discipline and the constant recital of "the Law"; left to themselves they gradually reverted to the habits and manners of the individual beasts out of which they had been carved. We may infer that some subtle organic chemistry worked its determination upon their uncontrolled wills, but Mr

Wells offers no explanation, psychic, chemical or biological, and I do not think that he intended any particular fable beyond the evident one that, physically, one species is as like to the next as makes no matter. What Moreau did well another man might have done better. It is a good story, and the adventures of the marooned Prendick, alone, are sufficient justification for the original conception. (I feel bound to note, however, the absurd comments of some early reviewers who seemed to imagine that the story was a defence of vivisection.)

The next romance (1897) seeks to answer the question: "What could a man do if he were invisible?" Various attempts to answer that question had been made by other writers, but none of them had come to it with Mr Wells' practical grasp of the real problem; the earlier romantics had not grappled with the necessity for clothes and the various ways in which a material man, however indistinguishable his body by our sense of sight, must leave traces of his passage. The study from beginning to end is finely realistic; and even the theory of the albino, Griffin, and in a lesser degree his method of winning the useless gift of invisibility, are convincing enough to make us wonder whether the thing is not scientifically possible. As a pure romance set in perfectly natural surroundings, *The Invisible Man* is possibly the high-water mark of Mr Wells' achievement in this kind. He has perfected his technique, and the interest in the development of the story works up steadily to the splendid climax, when the form of the berserker Griffin returns to visibility, his hands clenched, his eyes wide open, and on his face an expression of "anger and dismay," the elements—as I choose to think—of man's revolt against imprisonment in the flesh. It is worth while to note that by another statement, the same problem is posed and solved in the short story called *The Country of the Blind*.

The War of the Worlds (1898), although written in the first person, is in some ways the most detached of all these fantasies; and it is in this book that Mr Wells frankly confesses his own occasional sense of separation. "At times," says the narrator of the history, "I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me, I seem to watch it all from the outside, from somewhere inconceivably remote, out of time, out of space, out of the stress and tragedy of it all." That sense must have remained with him as he wrote the account of the invading Martians, so little passion does the book contain. The vision, however, is clear enough and there is more invention than in many of the other romances. The picture of the Martians themselves develops in one direction the theory of human evolution expressed in *The Man of the Year Million*. The expansion of the brain case, and the apotheosis of pure intellect, devoid, so far as we can judge, of any emotional expression, are the steadily biological deductions that we should expect from the Wells of this period. The fighting machines of these incomprehensible entities, the heat ray and the black smoke, are all excellent conceptions; and the narrative is splendidly graphic. But only in the scenes with the curate, when the narrator is stirred to passionate anger, and in his later passages with the sapper, do we catch any glimpses of the novelist intrigued with the intimate affairs of humanity. Even the narrator's brother, in his account of the escape with two women in a pony-carriage, has become infected with that sense of detachment. The two women are strongly differentiated but leave little impression of personality.

The fact that I have made this comment on lack of passion in describing one of these earlier romances is indicative of a particular difference between Mr Wells' method in this sort and the method of the lesser writer of fantasias. The latter, whatever his idea, and it may be a brilliant idea, is always intent on elaborating the wonder of his theme by direct description. Mr Wells is far more subtle and more effective. He takes an average individual, identifies him with the world as we know it, and then proceeds gradually to bring his marvel within the range of this individual's apprehension. We see the improbable, not too definitely, through the eyes of one who is prepared with the same incredulity as the reader of the story, and as a result the strange phenomenon, whether fallen angel, invisible man, converted beast or invading Martian, takes all the shape of reality. That this shape is convincing is due to the brilliance of Mr Wells' imagination and his power of graphic expression; the lesser writer might adopt the method and fail utterly to attain the effect; but it is this conception of the means to reach the

intelligence and senses of the average reader that chiefly distinguishes these romances from those of such writers as Jules Verne. Our approach to the wonderful is so gradual and so natural that when we are finally confronted with it the incredible thing has become inevitable and expected. Finally, it has become so identified with human surprise, anger or dismay that any failure of humanity in the chief person of the story reacts upon our conception of the wonderful intrusion among familiar phenomena.

Now, this power of creating the semblance of fact out of an ideal was too valuable a thing to be wasted on the making of stories that had no purpose beyond that of interesting or exciting the reader with such imaginations as the Martians, whose only use was to threaten humanity with extinction. Mr Wells' own sight of our blindness, our complacent acceptance of the sphere as an oblate or prolate spheroid, might be, he hoped, another of the marvels which we should come to accept through the medium of romance. So he began tentatively at first to introduce a vivid criticism of the futility of present-day society into his fantasies, and the first and the least of these books was that published in 1899 as *When the Sleeper Wakes*, a title afterwards changed to *The Sleeper Awakes*.

In the two opening chapters we find the same delightfully realistic treatment of the unprecedented slowly mingling with the commonplace. The first appearance of Graham the Sleeper, tormented then by the spectres and doubts that accompany insomnia, is made so credible that we accept his symptoms without the least demur; his condition is merely unusual enough to excite a trembling interest. Even the passing of his early years of trance does not arouse scepticism. But then we fall with one terrific plunge into the world of A.D. 2100, and, like Graham, we cannot realise it. Moreover this changed, developed world has a slightly mechanical air. The immense enclosed London, imagined by Mr Wells, is no Utopia, yet, like the dream of earlier prophets, it is too logical to entice us into any hallucination; and we come, fatally, to a criticism of the syllogism.

Mr Wells himself has confessed, in a new Preface, that this is "one of the most ambitious and least satisfactory" of his books; and explains that it was written against time, when he was on the verge of a serious illness. It is superfluous, therefore, to criticise it in detail, but one or two points in relation to the sociological idea must be emphasised.

The main theme is the growing division between Capital and Labour. The Giant Trust—managing the funds accumulated in Graham's name, a trust that has obtained possession of so immense a capital that it controls the chief activities of the world—is figured in the command of a certain Ostrog, who, with all the dependents that profit by the use of his wealth and such mercenaries as he can hold to himself, represents one party in opposition to the actual workers and producers, generically the People. The picture is the struggle of our own day in more acute form; the result, in the amended edition, is left open. "Who will win—Ostrog or the People?" Mr Wells writes in the Preface referred to above, and answers: "A thousand years hence that will still be just the open question we leave to-day."

I am not concerned in this place to question the validity of that answer, nor to suggest that the Wells of 1914 would not necessarily give the same account of his beliefs as the Wells of 1909, but I must draw attention to the attitude displayed in the book under consideration in order to point the change of feeling recognisable in later books. In *The Sleeper Awakes*, even in the revised version, the sociological theory is still mechanical, the prophecy at once too logical, and at the same time deduced from premises altogether too restricted. The world of A.D. 2100 is the world of to-day, with its more glaring contrasts still more glaringly emphasised; with its social incongruities and blindness raised to a higher power. And all that it lacked has been put into a romance called *In the Days of the Comet*

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