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SEVEN STORIES



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Seven Stories

BY H. G. WELLS

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This selection from the short stories of H. G. Wells has been compiled by the Overseas Editorial Department of the Oxford University Press. Some of the stories have been slightly abridged.

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BY H. G. WELLS

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Introduction

HERBERT GEORGE WELLS was born in 1866 and died in 1946.

He told of his early struggles in his *Experiment in Autobiography*, published in 1933, and the quotations in the following paragraphs are from that book.

'My mother was a very determined little woman. Almost as unquestioning as her belief in God was her belief in drapers. She sent me on trial with a view to apprenticeship to Messrs Podger and Denyer of Windsor, opposite the Castle. And from Messrs Podger and Denyer I got my first impressions of the intensely undesirable life which she designed for me.' H. G. Wells was about fourteen years old at the time. He never managed to make the money in the till at the end of the day coincide with the amount of money there should be according to the sales record. Ultimately, after fighting a young porter at the shop, he was dismissed. 'I was not fitted, said Messrs Podger and Denyer, with perfect truth, to be a draper.'

So for a while he became a teacher (at the age of fifteen) at the school of his Uncle Williams. But 'I had to find out what to teach. I fought my class, hit about them viciously and had altogether a lot of trouble with them.' It was not long before he was apprenticed to a chemist. In the course of this short apprenticeship he learnt Latin and studied science at Midhurst Grammar School. He left the chemist

and was soon apprenticed by his mother to another draper, with whom he stayed for two years, and from whom he was rescued to return to Midhurst Grammar School to teach, this time with some success, under the watchful care of an older teacher. At the same time he studied, mainly scientific subjects, and eventually won a scholarship to a training college for science teachers. From 1884 he studied science, working hard and neglecting his health so that by 1887 'my proper weight should have been 9 st. 11 lb., but I was generally nearer to seven, even in my clothes. And they were exceedingly shabby clothes.' He taught for a while again, and in the meantime he worked for a degree of Bachelor of Science, which he obtained in 1890.

For years, Wells had had a desire to write. And it was about this time that he began to write regularly reviews of books for an educational journal. By 1893-4, he was successful in getting articles accepted by other papers, and a few years later, 'in a couple of months I was earning more money than I had ever done in my class-teaching days.' From then onwards he continued to make his living by writing.

His imaginative writings fall into two main classes: those concerned with scientific fantasies and those concerned with people of the shop-assistant type that he came to know so well in his younger days. Besides imaginative fiction, however, he wrote works on education; as he says in his autobiography, while teaching at one school he asked himself, 'What on earth am I really up to here? Why am I giving these particular lessons in this particular

way? What *is* teaching for? At intervals, but persistently, I have been working out the answer to that all my life.'

Most of the scientific romances were written in his younger days, and the novels and stories of middle-class life in the period before the First World War. Many of his later novels have a 'message'.

The short stories that follow offer a fair cross-section of his work; they were first published between 1895 and 1906.



The scene is in London in the days when motor cars were still a rarity, cabs were pulled by horses and the underground railways were being built. Most of the story takes place in the residential part of London to the west of Hyde Park: West Kensington, Earl's Court, and Campden Hill are districts in that neighbourhood, and Paddington is the main railway terminus for the west of England.

The chief character, Lionel Wallace, is a Member of Parliament who, towards the end of the story, is likely to get an office in the Cabinet. It is one of the duties of a Member of Parliament to attend the House of Commons when a vote is being taken at the end of a debate: such voting is called a division. Often divisions are called for unexpectedly when many members are away from the House. If they have 'paired', i.e. agreed with a member of the opposite party that both of them will be away, they need not return to the House; otherwise they must hurry back to record their vote. It is the job of 'The Whips', themselves Members of Parliament, to make sure that other members of their party vote when required.



The Door in the Wall

ONE confidential evening, not three months ago, Lionel Wallace told me this story of *The Door in the Wall*. And at the time I thought that so far as he was concerned it was a true story.

He told it me with such a direct simplicity of conviction that I could not do otherwise than believe in him. But in the morning, in my own flat, I woke to a different atmosphere; and as I lay in bed and recalled the things he had told me, stripped of the glamour of his earnest slow voice, denuded of the focused, shaded table light, the shadowy atmosphere that wrapped about him and me, and the pleasant bright things, the dessert and glasses and napery of the dinner we had shared, making them for the time a bright little world quite cut off from everyday realities, I saw it all as frankly incredible. 'He was mystifying!' I said, and then: 'How well he did it! . . . It isn't quite the thing I should have expected him, of all people, to do well.'

Afterwards, as I sat up in bed and sipped my morning tea, I found myself trying to account for the flavour of reality that perplexed me in his impossible reminiscences, by supposing they did in some way suggest, present, convey—I hardly know which word to use—experiences it was otherwise impossible to tell.

Well, I don't resort to that explanation now. I have got over my intervening doubts. I believe now, as I believed at the moment of telling, that Wallace did to the very best

of his ability strip the truth of his secret for me. But whether he himself saw or only thought he saw, whether he himself was the possessor of an inestimable privilege or the victim of a fantastic dream, I cannot pretend to guess. Even the facts of his death, which ended my doubts for ever, throw no light on that.

That much the reader must judge for himself.

I forget now what chance comment or criticism of mine moved so reticent a man to confide in me. He was, I think, defending himself against an imputation of slackness and unreliability I had made, in relation to a great public movement in which he had disappointed me. But he plunged suddenly. 'I have,' he said, 'a preoccupation—

'I know,' he went on, after a pause, 'I have been negligent. The fact is—it isn't a case of ghosts or apparitions—but—it's an odd thing to tell of, Redmond—I am haunted. I am haunted by something—that rather takes the light out of things, that fills me with longings . . .'

He paused, checked by that English shyness that so often overcomes us when we would speak of moving or grave or beautiful things. 'You were at Saint Athelstan's all through,' he said, and for a moment that seemed to me quite irrelevant. 'Well—' and he paused. Then very haltingly at first, but afterwards more easily, he began to tell of the thing that was hidden in his life, the haunting memory of a beauty and a happiness that filled his heart with insatiable longings, that made all the interests and spectacle of worldly life seem dull and tedious and vain to him.

Now that I have the clue to it, the thing seems written visibly in his face. I have a photograph in which that look

of detachment has been caught and intensified. It reminds me of what a woman once said of him—a woman who had loved him greatly. ‘Suddenly,’ she said, ‘the interest goes out of him. He forgets you. He doesn’t care a rap for you—under his very nose . . .’

Yet the interest was not always out of him, and when he was holding his attention to a thing Wallace could contrive to be an extremely successful man. His career, indeed, was full of successes. He left me behind him long ago; he soared up over my head, and cut a figure in the world that I couldn’t cut—anyhow. He was still a year short of forty, and they say now that he would have been in office and very probably in the new Cabinet if he had lived. At school he always beat me without effort—as it were by nature. We were at school together at Saint Athelstan’s College in West Kensington for almost all our school-time. He came into the school as my co-equal, but he left far above me, in a blaze of scholarships and brilliant performance. Yet I think I did reasonably well. And it was at school I heard first of ‘The Door in the Wall’—that I was to hear of a second time only a month before his death.

To him at least The Door in the Wall was a real door, leading through a real wall to immortal realities. Of that I am now quite assured.

And it came into his life quite early, when he was a little fellow between five and six. I remember how, as he sat making his confession to me with a slow gravity, he reasoned and reckoned the date of it. ‘There was,’ he said, ‘a crimson Virginia creeper in it—all one bright uniform

crimson, in a clear amber sunshine against a white wall. That came into the impression somehow, though I don't clearly remember how, and there were horse-chestnut



leaves upon the clean pavement outside the green door. They were blotched yellow and green, you know, not brown nor dirty, so that they must have been new fallen. I take it that means October. I look out for horse-chestnut leaves every year and I ought to know.

'If I'm right in that, I was about five years and four months old.'

He was, he said, rather a precocious little boy—he learned to talk at an abnormally early age, and he was so

sane and 'old-fashioned', as people say, that he was permitted an amount of initiative that most children scarcely attain by seven or eight. His mother died when he was two, and he was under the less vigilant and authoritative care of a nursery governess. His father was a stern, pre-occupied lawyer, who gave him little attention and expected great things of him. For all his brightness he found life grey and dull, I think. And one day he wandered.

He could not recall the particular neglect that enabled him to get away, nor the course he took among the West Kensington roads. All that had faded among the incurable blurs of memory. But the white wall and the green door stood out quite distinctly.

As his memory of that childish experience ran, he did at the very first sight of that door experience a peculiar emotion, an attraction, a desire to get to the door and open it and walk in. And at the same time he had the clearest conviction that either it was unwise or it was wrong of him—he could not tell which—to yield to this attraction. He insisted upon it as a curious thing that he knew from the very beginning—unless memory has played him the queerest trick—that the door was unfastened, and that he could go in as he chose.

I seem to see the figure of that little boy, drawn and repelled. And it was very clear in his mind, too, though why it should be so was never explained, that his father would be very angry if he went in through that door.

Wallace described all these moments of hesitation to me with the utmost particularity. He went right past the door, and then, with his hands in his pockets and making an

infantile attempt to whistle, strolled right along beyond the end of the wall. There he recalls a number of mean, dirty shops, and particularly that of a plumber and decorator with a dusty disorder of earthenware pipes, sheet lead, taps, pattern books of wallpaper, and tins of enamel. He stood pretending to examine these things, and *coveting*, passionately desiring, the green door.

Then, he said, he had a gust of emotion. He made a run for it, lest hesitation should grip him again; he went plump with outstretched hand through the green door and let it slam behind him. And so, in a trice, he came into the garden that has haunted all his life.

It was very difficult for Wallace to give me his full sense of that garden into which he came.

There was something in the very air of it that exhilarated; that gave one a sense of lightness and good happening and well-being; there was something in the sight of it that made all its colour clean and perfect and subtly luminous. In the instant of coming into it one was exquisitely glad—as only in rare moments, and when one is young and joyful, one can be glad in this world. And everything was beautiful there. . .

Wallace mused before he went on telling me, 'You see,' he said, with the doubtful inflection of a man who pauses at incredible things, 'there were two great panthers there. . . . Yes, spotted panthers. And I was not afraid. There was a long wide path with marble-edged flower borders on either side, and these two huge velvety beasts were playing there with a ball. One looked up and came towards me, a little curious as it seemed. It came right up

to me, rubbed its soft round ear very gently against the small hand I held out, and purred. It was, I tell you, an enchanted garden. I know. And the size? Oh! it stretched far and wide, this way and that. I believe there were hills far away. Heaven knows where West Kensington had suddenly got to. And somehow it was just like coming home.

'You know, in the very moment the door swung to behind me, I forgot the road with its fallen chestnut leaves, its cabs and tradesmen's carts, I forgot the sort of gravitational pull back to the discipline and obedience of home, I forgot all hesitations and fear, forgot discretion, forgot all the intimate realities of this life. I became in a moment a very glad and wonder-happy little boy—in another world. It was a world with a different quality, a warmer, more penetrating and mellower light, with a faint clear gladness in its air, and wisps of sun-touched cloud in the blueness of its sky. And before me ran this long, wide path, invitingly, with weedless beds on either side, rich with untended flowers, and these two great panthers. I put my little hands fearlessly on their soft fur, and caressed their round ears and the sensitive corners under their ears, and played with them, and it was as though they welcomed me home. There was a keen sense of homecoming in my mind, and when presently a tall, fair girl appeared in the pathway and came to meet me, smiling, and said "Well?" to me, and lifted me and kissed me, and put me down and led me by the hand, there was no amazement, but only an impression of delightful rightness, of being reminded of happy things that had in some strange way been

overlooked. There were broad red steps, I remember, that came into view between spikes of delphinium, and up these we went to a great avenue between very old and shady dark trees. All down this avenue, you know, between the rough, red trunks, were marble seats and statues, and very tame and friendly white doves.

‘Along this cool avenue my girl-friend led me, looking down—I recall the pleasant lines, the finely-modelled chin of her sweet kind face—asking me questions in a soft, agreeable voice, and telling me things, pleasant things I know, though what they were I was never able to recall. . . . Presently a monkey, very clean, with a fur of ruddy brown and kindly hazel eyes, came down a tree to us and ran beside me, looking up at me and grinning, and presently leaped to my shoulder. So we two went on our way in great happiness.’

He paused.

‘Go on,’ I said.

‘I remember little things. We passed an old man musing among laurels, I remember, and a place gay with parakeets, and came through a broad shaded colonnade to a spacious cool palace, full of pleasant fountains, full of beautiful things, full of the quality and promise of heart’s desire. And there were many things and many people, some that still seem to stand out clearly and some that are vaguer; but all these people were beautiful and kind. In some way—I don’t know how—it was conveyed to me that they all were kind to me, glad to have me there, and filling me with gladness by their gestures, by the touch of their hands, by the welcome and love in their eyes. Yes—’