DAYS of the COMET

H. G. WELLS

In the DAYS of the COMET

H. G. WELLS

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET · NEW YORK 10022

In the DAYS of the COMET

H. G. WELLS

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET · NEW YORK 10022

CONTENTS

Prologue—The Man Who Wrote in the Tower 11

BOOK I THE COMET

Chapter

1 Dust in the Shadows 13
2 Nettie 34
3 The Revolver 52
4 War 83
5 The Pursuit of the Two Lovers 99

BOOK II THE GREEN VAPORS

1 The Change 117
2 The Awakening 132
3 The Cabinet Council 145

BOOK III THE NEW WORLD

1 Love After the Change 156
2 My Mother's Last Days 172
3 Beltane and New Year's Eve 181

Epilogue—The Window of the Tower 191

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbook.com

In the DAYS of the COMET

H. G. WELLS

Introduction

If ever the phrase "lucky break" could be applied literally, it could be applied to Herbert George Wells, born September 21, 1866, at 47 High Street, Bromley, Kent—now a suburb of London, England. He writes in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934): "My leg was broken for me when I was between seven and eight. Probably I am alive today and writing this autobiography, instead of being a worn-out, dismissed and already dead shop assistant, because my leg was broken. The agent of good fortune was 'young Sutton,' the grown-up son of the landlord of the *Bell*. I was playing outside the scoring tent in the cricket field and in all friendliness he picked me up and tossed me in the air. 'Whose little kid are you?' he said, and I wriggled, he missed his hold on me, and I snapped my tibia across a tent peg."

He had, Wells says, just taken to reading. Now his father went daily to the Literary Institute in Market Square to get one or two books for him; Mrs. Sutton sent some books—there was always a fresh book to read, and the boy's world expanded rapidly. His father, Joseph Wells, was an avid reader, despite the fact that gardening and cricket were his specialty. A cousin, who cared more for the money that Joseph and Sarah Neal Wells had to put up than their welfare, had sold them the china and glassware shop that went with the house on High Street. Joseph had lost his gardener's position, but they had some savings. It was not long before they realized how badly they had been

taken; the shop did very little business, and it was an unpleasant little house. Wells saw his mother grow old and bone-weary there, striving to keep it clean, to keep her three sons fed and clothed (a daughter died in childhood), while her heart yearned for the country. But they were trapped; they could not sell, save at a loss which would be ruinous.

Joseph Wells was a professional cricketeer; he made some money playing and instructing. It made the difference between poverty and abject poverty for the family. But young Herbert was undernourished and his health was not good most of his life.

The immediate result of this "lucky break" was that when he started schooling shortly after his recovery he was far in advance of the other children his age. He impressed both his classmates and his teachers, and this set up a chain of "connections" which eventually landed him at the Normal School of Science, South Kensington.

British education was in a sort of boom at the time; Wells had acquired a post as a teacher, wherein his task was to prepare students to pass an examination leading to advanced education. In those days, the examinations consisted of slight variations on a set number of questions in any subject. Little government schools were set up; and in order to justify themselves, they had to present a fair quota of successful examinees. The end result was that innumerable boys and girls were so instructed that they could pass the official examination with honor—without really knowing the subject at all! Wells's part was to prepare a textbook and hammer the examination answers into the students. He took an examination himself, since any instructor who gained honors thus was given a substantial bonus. However, Wells *knew* his subjects, and he passed his own examinations so splendidly that he found himself out of Midhurst and a "teacher in training" under Professor Huxley—the great T. H. Huxley whose reputation was not only world-wide but was earned, and who was an inspiring teacher as well as a famous scientist.

At the time, this was amusing and wonderful; as Wells matured, he would remember the shoddy state of education in his youth and write so much both of criticism and proposals about education that, in 1927, F. H. Doughty could write a fair-sized book fully living up to the promise of its title: *H. G. Wells: Educationist.*

He found, though, that he had defects in his very strength; throughout his learning years, Wells excelled in any subject in which he found an immediate interest, or in which an inspired teacher aroused his interest. Without these requisites, he simply

did not bother, assuming that he could "cram" at the last moment and pass the examination. It took a few painful and unexpected failures to teach him the error of such ways.

It was after such a failure that he took a position as teacher and football coach (British "football" is like American soccer); and it was here that a second "lucky break" occurred. As he describes it, ". . . the football season began. I played badly but with a desperate resolve to improve. The lean shock-headed intellectual doing his desperate tactless best in open-air games is never an attractive spectacle. . . . One bony youngster fouled me. He stooped, put his shoulders under my ribs, lifted me, and sent me sprawling.

"I got up with muddy hands and knees to go on playing. But a strange sickness seized upon me. There was a vast pain in my side. My courage failed me. I couldn't run. I couldn't kick. 'I'm going in,' I said, and returned sulkily to the house regardless of the game, amidst sounds of incredulous derision."

His left kidney had been crushed. Had it not been for this, he might have spent his life as a teacher. Illness and accident closed the doors, one by one, until the only course open to Herbert George Wells was journalism. He wrote scientific articles; he wrote essays—social criticism, book reviews and play reviews. (His first published book was a collection of essays entitled *Select Conversations with an Uncle*; 1898.) It was precarious until he realized that he had been shooting over his target—seeking rare and precious topics. And legend has it that Frank Harris, upon Wells's application as a reviewer of scientific books for the *Saturday Review*, replied, amidst expletives, "Why don't you write funny stories about science?"

He took the hint, partially at least; while there are touches of humor in his fiction, hardly any can be considered "funny" stories. They are visions of a possible future, either in the broad, over-all sense or of the possible effects of this or that discovery or invention upon society and the world. *The Time Machine* (1895—Airmont 1964) is a panorama of the far future; *The Invisible Man* (1897—Airmont 1964) examines the social consequences of invisibility; *The War of the Worlds* (1898—Airmont 1964) tells of humanity's reactions to an invasion from Mars; *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896—Airmont 1966) deals with human attempts to play God. And most of the famous short stories were written in these early years.

There is a great deal of barely concealed autobiography in these early works, and this is particularly true of the first chapters of *In the Days of the Comet*; the descriptions of Willie's

home and of his mother are but slight variations on 47 High Street, Bromley, Kent, and Sarah Neal Wells. But it is the vivid portrayal of the mean life of those times, of the hopelessness of the poor and lower middle class, which remains vivid today. Wells wrote with the earnestness of a Socialist, which he was—though he retained a lifelong antipathy to Karl Marx and all forms of Marxism. Yet, even in the early tales, his comprehension of character is such that neither his rich, poor, nor his middle-class people are caricatures. He shows them all as they are—and then shows why none can be entirely blamed for being what they are; biting, his portraits often are—venomous, they hardly ever are.

Times are bad as this novel opens; a business depression is coming, and hardly anyone except astronomers pay any attention to the comet that is seen approaching Earth. Embittered with his lot in life, Willie aggravates his situation further by demanding a raise from his employer, then walking out when it is refused. Day by day, the comet comes closer; people begin to predict the end of the world. There is a great revival of itinerant preaching, and a strike breaks out in the collieries not far from where Willie lives. But what plunges him into utter rage and despair is his learning that Nettie, the girl who rejected him, has run away with the son of the owner of the property on which her parents live. He purchases a revolver determined to hunt down the couple and kill them both.

There are rumors of war with Germany; when Willie arrives at the seaside resort to which the lovers have fled, the rumors have become fact. And the comet fills the air with a green glow each night; then Earth's atmosphere is filled with the gasses in the comet, even as a naval battle rages in the Channel, and every living thing on the planet sleeps. . . . .

To awaken . . . changed! Something has happened to human beings all over the world. They see themselves as they are. They see what they have been, and what their blindness and stupidity have led to. And humanity arises from its brief period of sleep, repentant and determined to set things right.

As with most of Wells's stories, the plot of *In the Days of the Comet* is a simple one which can be outlined in a few words; but the way he has thrown all his insight, all his hopes, fears, loves, and hates into this picture of a world renewed makes this a tale of wonder, half a century old as it is. You will find it absorbing; and perhaps you will ponder, as the author clearly wants you to—"What if it really happened—today!"

But H. G. Wells was in earnest about changing the world. He

joined the Fabian Society (the British Socialists), differed violently with them when he found they had no practical program of *how* to rebuild and reform society once (and if) they received the mandate, and after a futile attempt to persuade them that they themselves were blind guides who needed to learn how to see, he left them. He never attained any political position in his lifetime, but it would be truly written of him that he was "a vigorous and restless thinker who has powerfully disturbed the waters of his generation." (Edward Shanks). "Mr. Wells possesses the intolerable power of setting me off thinking anew when I have shaken down comfortably among my own ideas, and do not want to hear any more of his." (Vernon Lee). These gentlemen were well-known in education, and were thinking particularly of Wells's writings on this subject (which are scattered through his mainstream novels as well as in essays and studies directly related to education), but their statements could be made about nearly any aspect of Wells's writing.

He had no faith in governments. How, then, did he propose to rebuild society? His later works, fiction and non-fiction, call for a world-wide organization of dedicated intellectuals—a dictatorship not of the proletariat but of the elite. Precisely how they will obtain power remains obscure; in the movie script derived from *The Shape of Things to Come*, a war that ends in world-wide ruin and exhaustion provides the opportunity. He was the most famous of champions of the World State before the Great War, and remained its champion for life. But he does not face the problem of how to prevent a revolutionary order from serving its own, rather than society's ends, and thus becoming more oppressive in the end than the regime it overthrew.

A humanist and materialist, Wells equated evil with ignorance and regarded universal scientific education as the answer. It does not seem to have occurred to him that educating the petty thief would as likely make of him a master swindler as a reformed, honest citizen.

Yet, in the end, he was forced to acknowledge that there are some things, something at least similar to what are called spiritual forces, which are not amenable to neat materialistic and scientific solutions.

He had seen himself acclaimed as virtually the universal man; he was denounced by those whom he considered the right people to denounce him—a happy fate! He was a modern prophet—not so much predicting the future exactly (forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!) but proclaiming what must be done lest *some* sort of disaster come (thus saith the Lord!). It is a moot

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbook.com

point whether his clouded vision of the years 1934-1966, as outlined in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), is more or less horrible than what actually happened in history during those years. But *The Croquet Player* (1938) shows him wondering if he has not overlooked something, for this powerful allegory touches upon the very real demonic factor in all humanity, at all times. And it was written before, not after, the actual climactic horrors of Buchenwald, Belsen, etc.

He was not a fanatic; he never imagined that the disaster he predicted came about precisely because the world would not listen to *him;* there were other voices crying other solutions in the wilderness, who were also ignored. But something of Wells's warning could have been combined with the warnings of Churchill, Keynes, and others to prevent the debacle that started in 1939.

Most of what he considered his most important work at the time is sadly dated today, but his *Outline of History* is still worth reading. The autobiography is entirely rewarding. And not one of the early scientific romances has lost its freshness.

Now, twenty years after his death in 1946, the World State Wells envisioned is perhaps even less a viable potentiality than it was when he first began to preach about it. But stories like *In the Days of the Comet* still grip the imaginations of all sorts and conditions of men.

—Robert A. W. Lowndes

Prologue

The Man Who Wrote in the Tower

I saw a gray-haired man, a figure of hale age, sitting at a desk and writing.

He seemed to be in a room in a tower, very high, so that through the tall window on his left one perceived only distances, a remote horizon of sea, a headland and that vague haze and glitter in the sunset that many miles away marks a city. All the appointments of this room were orderly and beautiful, and in some subtle quality, in this small difference and that, new to me and strange. They were in no fashion I could name, and the simple costume the man wore suggested neither period nor country. It might, I thought, be the Happy Future, or Utopia, or the Land of Simple Dreams; an errant mote of memory, Henry James's phrase and story of "The Great Good Place," twinkled across my mind, and passed and left no light.

The man I saw wrote with a thing like a fountain pen, a modern touch that prohibited any historical retrospection, and as he finished each sheet, writing in an easy flowing hand, he added it to a growing pile upon a graceful little table under the window. His last done sheets lay loose, partly covering others that were clipped together into fascicles.

Clearly he was unaware of my presence, and I stood waiting until his pen should come to a pause. Old as he certainly was he wrote with a steady hand. . . .

I discovered that a concave speculum hung slantingly high over his head; a movement in this caught my attention sharply, and I looked up to see, distorted and made fantastic but bright and beautifully colored, the magnified, reflected, evasive rendering of a palace, of a terrace, of the vista of a great roadway with many people, people exaggerated, impossible-looking because of the curvature of the mirror, going to and fro. I turned my head quickly that I might see more clearly through the window behind me, but it was too high for me to survey this nearer scene directly, and after a momentary pause I came back to that distorting mirror again.

But now the writer was leaning back in his chair. He put down his pen and sighed the half resentful sigh—"ah! you work, you! how you gratify and tire me!"—of a man who has been writing to his satisfaction.

"What is this place," I asked, "and who are you?"

He looked around with the quick movement of surprise. "What is this place?" I repeated, "and where am I?"

He regarded me steadfastly for a moment under his wrinkled brows, and then his expression softened to a smile. He pointed to a chair beside the table. "I am writing," he said.

"About this?"

"About the Change."

I sat down. It was a very comfortable chair, and well placed under the light.

"If you would like to read—" he said.

I indicated the manuscript. "This explains?" I asked.

"That explains," he answered.

He drew a fresh sheet of paper toward him as he looked at me.

I glanced from him about his apartment and back to the little table. A fascicle marked very distinctly "1" caught my attention, and I took it up. I smiled in his friendly eyes. "Very well," said I, suddenly at my ease, and he nodded and went on writing. And in a mood between confidence and curiosity, I began to read.

This is the story that happy, active-looking old man in that pleasant place had written.

Book I
THE COMET

Chapter the First
Dust in the Shadows

1

I have set myself to write the story of the Great Change, so far as it has affected my own life and the lives of one or two people closely connected with me, primarily to please myself.

Long ago in my crude unhappy youth, I conceived the desire of writing a book. To scribble secretly and dream of authorship was one of my chief alleviations, and I read with a sympathetic envy every scrap I could get about the world of literature and the lives of literary people. It is something, even amidst this present happiness, to find leisure and opportunity to take up and partially realize these old and hopeless dreams. But that alone, in a world where so much of vivid and increasing interest presents itself to be done, even by an old man, would not, I think, suffice to set me at this desk. I find some such recapitulation of my past as this will involve, is becoming necessary to my own secure mental continuity. The passage of years brings a man at last to retrospection; at seventy-two one's youth is far more important than it was at forty. And I am out of touch with my youth. The old life seems so cut off from the new, so alien and so unreasonable, that at times I find it bordering upon the incredible. The data have gone, the buildings and places. I stopped dead the other afternoon in my walk across the moor, where once the dismal outskirts of Swathinglea straggled toward Leet, and asked, "Was it here indeed that I crouched among the weeds and refuse and broken crockery and loaded my revolver ready for murder? Did ever such a thing happen in my life? Was such a mood and thought and intention ever possible to me? Rather, has not some queer nightmare spirit out of dreamland slipped a pseudo-memory into the records of my vanished life?" There must be many alive still who have the same perplexities. And I think too that those who are now growing up to take our places in the great enterprise of mankind, will need many such narratives as mine for even the most partial conception of the old world of shadows that came before our day. It chances too that my case is fairly typical of the Change; I was caught mid-

way in a gust of passion; and a curious accident put me for a time in the very nucleus of the new order. . . .

My memory takes me back across the interval of fifty years to a little ill-lit room with a sash window open to a starry sky, and instantly there returns to me the characteristic smell of that room, the penetrating odor of an ill-trimmed lamp, burning cheap paraffin. Lighting by electricity had then been perfected for fifteen years, but still the larger portion of the world used these lamps. All this first scene will go, in my mind at least, to that olfactory accompaniment. That was the evening smell of the room. By day it had a more subtle aroma, a closeness, a peculiar sort of faint pungency that I associate—I know not why—with dust.

Let me describe this room to you in detail. It was perhaps eight feet by seven in area and rather higher than either of these dimensions; the ceiling was of plaster, cracked and bulging in places, gray with the soot of the lamp, and in one place discolored by a system of yellow and olive-green stains caused by the percolation of damp from above. The walls were covered with dun-colored paper, upon which had been printed in oblique reiteration a crimson shape, something of the nature of a curly ostrich feather, or an acanthus flower, that had in its less faded moments a sort of dingy gaiety. There were several big plaster-rimmed wounds in this, caused by Parload's ineffectual attempts to get nails into the wall, whereby there might hang pictures. One nail had hit between two bricks and got home, and from this depended, sustained a little insecurely by frayed and knotted blind-cord, Parload's hanging bookshelves, planks painted over with a treacly blue enamel and further decorated by a fringe of pinked American cloth insecurely fixed by tacks. Below this was a little table that behaved with a mulish vindictiveness to any knee that was thrust beneath it suddenly; it was covered with a cloth whose pattern of red and black had been rendered less monotonous by the accidents of Parload's versatile ink bottle, and on it, *leit motif* of the whole, stood and stank the lamp. This lamp, you must understand, was of some whitish translucent substance that was neither china nor glass; it had a shade of the same substance, a shade that did not protect the eyes of a reader in any measure; and it seemed admirably adapted to bring into pitiless prominence the fact that, after the lamp's trimming, dust and paraffin had been smeared over its exterior with a reckless generosity.

The uneven floor boards of this apartment were covered with scratched enamel of chocolate hue, on which a small island of frayed carpet dimly blossomed in the dust and shadows.

There was a very small grate, made of cast-iron in one piece

and painted buff, and a still smaller misfit of a cast-iron fender that confessed the gray stone of the hearth. No fire was laid, only a few scraps of torn paper and the bowl of a broken corncob pipe were visible behind the bars, and in the corner and rather thrust away was an angular japanned coal-box with a damaged hinge. It was the custom in those days to warm every room separately from a separate fireplace, more prolific of dirt than heat, and the rickety sash window, the small chimney, and the loose-fitting door were expected to organize the ventilation of the room among themselves without any further direction.

Parload's truckle bed hid its gray sheets beneath an old patchwork counterpane on one side of the room, and veiled his boxes and such-like oddments, and invading the two corners of the window were an old whatnot and the washhandstand, on which were distributed the simple appliances of his toilet.

This washhandstand had been made of deal by some one with an excess of turnery appliances in a hurry, who had tried to distract attention from the rough economies of his workmanship by an arresting ornamentation of blobs and bulbs upon the joints and legs. Apparently the piece had then been placed in the hands of some person of infinite leisure equipped with a pot of ocherous paint, varnish, and a set of flexible combs. This person had first painted the article, then, I fancy, smeared it with varnish, and then sat down to work with the combs to streak and comb the varnish into a weird imitation of the grain of some nightmare timber. The washhandstand so made had evidently had a prolonged career of violent use, had been chipped, kicked, splintered, punched, stained, scorched, hammered, desiccated, damped, and defiled, had met indeed with almost every possible adventure except a conflagration or a scrubbing, until at last it had come to this high refuge of Parload's attic to sustain the simple requirements of Parload's personal cleanliness. There were, in chief, a basin and a jug of water and a slop-pail of tin, and, further, a piece of yellow soap in a tray, a tooth-brush, a rat-tailed shaving brush, one huckaback towel, and one or two other minor articles. In those days only very prosperous people had more than such an equipage, and it is to be remarked that every drop of water Parload used had to be carried by an unfortunate servant girl—the "slavey," Parload called her—up from the basement to the top of the house and subsequently down again. Already we begin to forget how modern an invention is personal cleanliness. It is a fact that Parload had never stripped for a swim in his life; never had a simultaneous bath all over his body since his childhood. Not one in fifty of us did in the days of which I am telling you.

A chest, also singularly grained and streaked, of two large and

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbook.com