

H. G. WELLS

THE ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU



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of
DR. MOREAU**



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H. G. WELLS

Introduction

"... And I may as well say that all the instruction I ever had—exception made of that in vegetable gardening—I had from the mouth of H. G., and if I ever have astonished people—and Mr. Wells himself once wrote a book of caricatures in which he portrayed me as a monster of omniscience—it is simply because I have a wonderful memory and Mr. Wells hasn't. I remember, I mean, all the things that Mr. Wells has forgotten that he told me. Whenever I have had occasion to say rude things about Science and to show that I knew at least something about it, the knowledge came from Mr. Wells's discourses—on the theory and practice of organic and inorganic chemistry, bacteriology, biology, physics, or the origin of the species. . . ."

Thus writes Ford Madox Ford (Hueffer) in his essay on H. G. Wells in *Portraits from Life*, a collection which has been criticized for exaggeration and inaccuracies, but which nevertheless (at least in the case of Wells) does not give a false impression. Innumerable others have testified to Wells's erudition on an amazingly wide variety of subjects and, above all, the impact he had upon all sorts and conditions of men. An author, holding no political position, who could be a welcome visitor both to American Presidents and the first two rulers of Soviet Russia is hardly overestimated in the passage quoted above.

One who did not know would surely assume that Herbert George Wells must have been born into a wealthy, influential,

and well-educated family on September 21, 1866; or, if not this, then he must have been adopted in some way into such an environment very early in life. Neither assumption is correct. Joseph and Sarah Neal Wells owned a mean little house (including a shop filled with crockery, china, glassware, and a special line of cricket equipment) at 47 High Street, Bromley, Kent, England; the elder Wells had invested the family savings in it when a cousin, George Wells, wanted to sell out—and soon learned that he had been thoroughly gulled. There was never sufficient business for a decent living—even on the modest level to which Joseph and Sarah Wells aspired.

Joseph Wells was an expert cricketer, as close to the position of a first-class modern professional baseball player as it was possible for a member of the lower middle class to come in Victorian England. What this meant was that he was widely known, greatly admired by cricket lovers, and was able to earn some income as a professional player and instructor. It did not mean national fame or a fabulous salary; combined with the little business at the shop, the Wellses barely managed to scrape along. They were undernourished; Sarah Wells was overworked (a maid was rarely possible); and the children never had new clothes until they were grown and making their own way. (Never? Well, at best, hardly ever.)

What sort of future would you have predicted for the three sons of Joseph and Sarah Wells? (A daughter died in childhood.) The inescapable conclusion certainly would be that Sarah Wells was right in getting the boys apprenticed in the drapery business as early as possible, since there were relatives who could help to this extent. And Herbert George's older and younger brothers were started out in just such a way. One could hope that, with ability and application, the three boys would work their way up to assistant managership of a drapery shop; and, at last, own their own shops. How much further could any of them be expected to go?

But there was one element in the Wells family unit that one did not always find among persons in such an environment. In his youth, Joseph Wells had been an excellent gardener and had worked for another Joseph Wells (no relation) who encouraged him to read books. The little house on High Street had a fascinating variety of books, and young Herbert became an early reader, with his father's enthusiastic encouragement. As a result, he was considerably ahead of his classes when he first went to school; he had little difficulty in attaining honors; and, in addition, his imagination was developed early in life.

The facts of Wells's life between his first schooling and the

time he became an author by profession would never do in a work of fiction. They are a web of improbabilities, interspersed with providential occurrences. And both the general state of education in England at this time and the range of opportunities open to such a boy in the lower middle class seem to be the imaginings of a satirical or embittered political author with an axe to grind when one reads of them today. In addition to this, the very facility with which the boy managed to shine out during his earliest schooling was a disadvantage, one would say. He acquired the notion that he could excel without great effort—unless something interested him so much that he wanted to work hard at it. The result was that when he encountered either dull subjects or uninspiring teachers he just did not bother.

You will find the detailed story in his fascinating *Experiments in Autobiography*, one of the best autobiographies written in this century. Grants and scholarships took him to the Normal School of Science, South Kensington, where he studied biology under one of the greatest scientists and most inspiring teachers of the day, T. H. Huxley. He responded and passed the course with honors; with other instructors who had neither Huxley's erudition or *charisma*, he did less well. There were many false starts, including drapery apprenticeship, which he always remembered with horror, before he turned to writing.

One thinks of Wells's literary debut as *The Time Machine*, but he had written and published textbooks and innumerable articles on science and education (mostly unsigned, for which he was grateful later) before 1895. His first sale of note was an article, *The Rediscovery of the Unique*, which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* (July 1891). So taken was editor Frank Harris with this that when Wells submitted a second article, *The Universe Rigid*, Harris merely glanced at the title, then sent it down to the print shop to be set up at once. Harris's reactions when he read the article in proof, and his subsequent interview with the author, belong in the realm of high comedy; only Charles Chaplin, playing both roles, could re-create the scenes with justice.

The first book was not fiction, but a collection of essays, *Select Conversations with an Uncle* (1895). In the same year, *The Time Machine* appeared between hard covers; it had grown out of the article that Harris had waxed apoplectic about and an unfinished work, *The Chronic Argonauts*, which ran in several issues of *The Science Schools Journal*. As *The Time Machine*, in a form nearly that of the final book version, it was the first serial to appear in *The New Review* (1894-5).

Wells had thought he had a career lined up for him as teacher and coach, but illness and accident put an end to it; he would

say in his autobiography that fortuitous misfortune seemed to thrust him finally into journalism. Ford Madox Ford tells of how H. G. visited Frank Harris to ask for the position of reviewer of scientific works for the *Saturday Review*, and Harris, amidst his usual expletives, asked Wells why he didn't write funny stories about science. True or not, Wells did find somewhere around this period that he had been trying too hard in the wrong direction; there was a good market for him in fiction, and he could use his scientific background very handily in writing "scientific romances" which were salable and popular.

The short stories made him a "name"; he started expanding into novels, both what we would today call science fiction and mainstream; into these went his notions of what the future might bring, his insights into the frightful conditions of the poor and lower middle class life which he knew so well, the deplorable state of education, the stultifying Victorian "morality," and the entire range of social problems visible in his day. He considered himself a Socialist—but not of the Marxian variety; all his life he would consider Karl Marx and the movement based upon Marx's works as a disastrous influence upon mankind and its hopes for a better future. But the limitations of vision and sheer historical and economic ignorance of the Fabians (the British Socialist Society) revolted him nearly as much.

None of Wells's fictional efforts are simply stories and nothing more; all are vehicles for his insights upon the human condition, criticism of existing social conditions, and propaganda for the scientifically run society he envisioned as possible for the world. *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) is a nightmare of technology triumphant along with the success of the ignorant sort of "labor leaders" he encountered in his brief and disastrous attempts to enter politics effectively. *In the Days of the Comet* (1906—Airmont 1966) is a vision of the world changed for the better by a cosmic occurrence. *Ann Veronica* (1909—a mainstream novel) deals with the emancipation of women, socially rather than politically. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) can be read as allegory, as well as a scientific horror tale.

Shipwrecked, one Charles Edward Prendick is adrift with two other men in an open boat; and when the boat is sighted by a passing ship, he is the sole survivor. His rescuer is a man named Montgomery, who has a strangely deformed man as a servant. Prendick cannot understand why he finds the man so revolting, for the servant seems to inspire loathing far beyond the measure of distaste which would be normal upon seeing such a specimen. The sailors aboard the ship hate this servant in the same way.

The ship's cargo is composed of animals and they are bound

for a small, out-of-the-way island, inhabited by Montgomery and his colleague, Dr. Moreau. Prendick wonders where he has heard the name "Moreau" before. He cannot place it, yet he associates it with some sort of scandal, some particularly gruesome horror. Montgomery does not want Prendick to come ashore, but the captain of the ship will not have the uninvited guest and throws him overboard. Prendick will have to be the far-from-welcome guest of Moreau and Montgomery until a passing ship can be hailed—and these are very few.

Once on the island, he finds that Moreau and Montgomery spend most of their time in the laboratory (off-limits to the guest) from which come the agonized cries of animals. The first night there, against orders, he leaves the house and takes a walk, to encounter more creatures as strange, revolting, and somehow terrifying as Montgomery's servant. More than that, he realizes that one of these creatures is stalking him.

The secret of the lifework of Dr. Moreau and the terrifying creatures of the island make for one of the most powerful and memorable tales ever written, a story that is as fresh today (where the possibilities of scientific tampering with human beings grow ever closer) as it was when it was written. A very effective motion picture, *The Island of Lost Souls*, starring Charles Laughton as Moreau, was made in the early thirties.

Year after year, Wells's influence grew, for his mainstream novels were provocative and shocking; they drew virulent denunciation from the "conservatives" and no less powerful acclaim from the "progressives" of the day. His effect upon the several generations between the late nineties and the post-World-War-I period cannot be overestimated. Unlike Hamlet, he did not curse the spite through which it seemed he was called to set things right; he embraced the opportunity passionately; he considered himself the prophet of the future, the man who would show the way to the world. Little by little, his novels became more exhortation and less story; and as his impatience with humanity grew, his preaching became suffused with more asperity.

Independent sovereign nations must go; salvation lies in a World State with equality of the sexes and universal education rooted in history and sciences chiefly. This transformation from storyteller to propagandist was not greeted with world-wide approval. H. L. Mencken would write an essay, *The Late Mr. Wells*, tracing the "gradual and obscure decay" by which the splendid artist who wrote *Tono-Bungay* (1909) degenerated into a man with the "Messianic delusion" who could perpetrate *Joan and Peter* (1918). Others, who might question the artistic desirability of twenty- or thirty-page essays in the midst of a novel,

had opposite views of the value of Wells's later works nonetheless. The relative value of fiction mixed with the artist's own individual proclamations (propaganda, but not the official "line" of any particular political party—an important distinction) remains an open question.

Wells's last major work was a trilogy, *The Outline of History* (the final edition completely by Wells is dated 1931; the 1961 edition presents Wells's drafts for revision after 1931 and a brief survey of events following Wells's death; various sections throughout the work have been revised by other hands as well); *The Science of Life* (with Julian Huxley and G. P. Wells—1929), and *The Work, Wealth, and Happiness of Mankind* (1932). *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) is a history of the future up to the early twenty-first century. Reading it today, one appreciates Wells's writing ability and his insights, but as a prophet foretelling the future with accuracy, he is a failure. The events he predicts between 1933 and 1966 make for equal parts of horror and amusement.

The *Experiment in Autobiography* ends in 1934, when he was sixty-eight. Perhaps it is just as well. His influence had already passed its peak. Today few remember how tremendous a grasp he had upon the imaginations and aspirations of young people before 1918. Ford Madox Ford sums it up in his essay when he tells of how he nearly succumbed to a gas attack during the Great War; somehow he felt apathetic. Here they all were, right in the midst of exactly the sort of cataclysm that H. G. had been predicting, and they would be wiped out by weapons of destruction and horror that he had predicted, too!

Wells died in 1946, no longer a voice to which the world listened eagerly, and many of what he considered his most important works are forgotten. But the early scientific romances are still full of life.

—ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES

CHAPTER 1 In the Dingey of the "Lady Vain"

I do not propose to add anything to what has already been written concerning the loss of the *Lady Vain*. As everyone knows, she collided with a derelict when ten days out from Callao. The long-boat with seven of the crew was picked up eighteen days after by H.M. gun-boat *Myrtle*, and the story of their privations has become almost as well known as the far more terrible *Medusa* case. I have now, however, to add to the published story of the *Lady Vain* another as horrible, and certainly far stranger. It has hitherto been supposed that the four men who were in the dingey perished, but this is incorrect. I have the best evidence for this assertion—I am one of the four men.

But, in the first place, I must state that there never were four men in the dingey; the number was three. Constans, who was "seen by the captain to jump into the gig" (*Daily News*, March 17, 1887), luckily for us, and unluckily for himself, did not reach us. He came down out of the tangle of ropes under the stays of the smashed bowsprit; some small rope caught his heel as he let go and he hung for a moment head downward, and then fell and struck a block or spar floating in the water. We pulled towards him, but he never came up.

I say luckily for us he did not reach us, and I might also add luckily for himself, for there were only a small beaker of water and some soddened ship's biscuits with us—so sudden had been the alarm, so unprepared the ship for any disaster. We thought the people on the launch would be better provisioned (though it seems they were not), and we tried to hail them. They could not have heard us, and the next morning when the drizzle cleared—which was not until past mid-day—we could see nothing of them. We could not stand up to look about us because of the pitching of the boat. The sea ran in great rollers, and we had much ado to keep the boat's head to them. The two other men who had escaped so far with me were a man named Helmar, a passenger like

myself, and a seaman whose name I don't know, a short sturdy man with a stammer.

We drifted famishing, and, after our water had come to an end, tormented by an intolerable thirst, for eight days altogether. After the second day the sea subsided slowly to a glassy calm. It is quite impossible for the ordinary reader to imagine those eight days. He has not—luckily for himself—anything in his memory to imagine with. After the first day we said little to one another, and lay in our places in the boat and stared at the horizon, or watched, with eyes that grew larger and more haggard every day, the misery and weakness gaining upon our companions. The sun became pitiless. The water ended on the fourth day, and we were already thinking strange things and saying them with our eyes; but it was, I think, the sixth before Helmar gave voice to the thing we all had in mind. I remember our voices dry and thin, so that we bent towards one another and spared our words. I stood out against it with all my might, was rather for scuttling the boat and perishing together among the sharks that followed us; but when Helmar said that if his proposal was accepted we should have drink, the sailor came round to him.

I would not draw lots, however, and in the night the sailor whispered to Helmar again and again, and I sat in the bows with my clasp-knife in my hand—though I doubt if I had the stuff in me to fight. And in the morning I agreed to Helmar's proposal, and we handed halfpence to find the odd man.

The lot fell upon the sailor, but he was the strongest of us and would not abide by it, and attacked Helmar with his hands. They grappled together and almost stood up. I crawled along the boat to them, intending to help Helmar by grasping the sailor's leg, but the sailor stumbled with the swaying of the boat, and the two fell upon the gunwhale and rolled overboard together. They sank like stones. I remember laughing at that and wondering why I laughed. The laugh caught me suddenly like a thing from without.

I lay across one of the thwarts for I know not how long, thinking that if I had the strength I would drink sea-water and madden myself to die quickly. And even as I lay there I saw, with no more interest than if it had been a picture, a sail come up towards me over the skyline. My mind must have been wandering, and yet I remember all that happened quite distinctly. I remember how my head swayed with the

seas, and the horizon with the sail above it danced up and down. But I also remember as distinctly that I had a persuasion that I was dead, and that I thought what a jest it was they should come too late by such a little to catch me in my body.

For an endless period, as it seemed to me, I lay with my head on the thwart watching the dancing schooner—she was a little ship, schooner-rigged fore and aft—come up out of the sea. She kept tacking to and fro in a widening compass, for she was sailing dead into the wind. It never entered my head to attempt to attract attention, and I do not remember anything distinctly after the sight of her side, until I found myself in a little cabin aft. There is a dim half memory of being lifted up to the gangway and of a big round countenance, covered with freckles and surrounded with red hair, staring at me over the bulwarks. I also had a disconnected impression of a dark face with extraordinary eyes close to mine, but that I thought was a nightmare until I met it again. I fancy I recollect some stuff being poured in between my teeth. And that is all.

CHAPTER 2 The Man Who Was Going Nowhere

The cabin in which I found myself was small and rather untidy. A youngish man with flaxen hair, a bristly straw-coloured moustache, and a dropping nether lip was sitting and holding my wrist. For a minute we stared at one another without speaking. He had watery grey expressionless eyes.

Then just overhead came a sound like an iron bedstead being knocked about and the low angry growling of some large animal. At the same time the man spoke again.

He repeated his question: "How do you feel now?"

I think I said I felt all right. I could not recollect how I had got there. He must have seen the question in my face, for my voice was inaccessible to me.

"You were picked up in a boat—starving. The name on the boat was the *Lady Vain*, and there were queer marks on the gunwhale." At the same time my eye caught my hand, so thin that it looked like a dirty skin purse full of loose bones, and all the business of the boat came back to me.

"Have some of this," said he, and gave me a dose of some scarlet stuff, iced.

It tasted like blood, and made me feel stronger.

"You were in luck," said he, "to get picked up by a ship with a medical man aboard." He spoke with a slobbering articulation, with the ghost of a lisp.

"What ship is this?" I said slowly, hoarse from my long silence.

"It's a little trader from Arica and Callao. I never asked where she came from in the beginning. Out of the land of born fools, I guess. I'm a passenger myself from Arica. The silly ass who owns her—he's captain too, named Davis—he's lost his certificate or something. You know the kind of man—calls the thing the *Ipecacuanha*—of all silly infernal names, though when there's much of a sea without any wind she certainly acts according."

Then the noise overhead began again, a snarling growl and the voice of a human being together. Then another voice telling some "Heaven-forsaken idiot" to desist.

"You were nearly dead," said my interlocutor. "It was a very near thing indeed. But I've put some stuff into you now. Notice your arms sore? Injections. You've been insensible for nearly thirty hours."

I thought slowly. I was distracted now by the yelping of a number of dogs. "May I have solid food?" I asked.

"Thanks to me," he said. "Even now the mutton is boiling."

"Yes," I said, with assurance; "I could eat some mutton."

"But," said he, with a momentary hesitation, "you know I'm dying to hear how you came to be alone in the boat." I thought I detected a certain suspicion in his eyes.

"Damn that howling!"

He suddenly left the cabin, and I heard him in violent controversy with someone who seemed to me to talk gibberish in response to him. The matter sounded as though it ended in blows, but in that I thought my ears were mistaken. Then he shouted at the dogs and returned to the cabin.

"Well?" said he, in the doorway. "You were just beginning to tell me."

I told him my name, Edward Prendick, and how I had taken to natural history as a relief from the dulness of my comfortable independence. He seemed interested in this. "I've done some science myself—I did my Biology at University College,—getting out the ovary of the earthworm and the radula of the snail and all that. Lord! it's ten years ago. But go on, go on—tell me about the boat."

He was evidently satisfied with the frankness of my story, which I told in concise sentences enough—for I felt horribly weak,—and when it was finished he reverted presently to the topic of natural history and his own biological studies. He began to question me closely about Tottenham Court Road and Gower Street. "Is Caplatzi still flourishing? What a shop that was!" He had evidently been a very ordinary medical student, and drifted incontinently to the topic of the music-halls. He told me some anecdotes. "Left it all," he said, "ten years ago. How jolly it all used to be! But I made a young ass of myself. . . . Played myself out before I was twenty-one. I daresay it's all different now. . . . But I must look up that ass of a cook and see what he's doing to your mutton."

The growling overhead was renewed, so suddenly and with so much savage anger that it startled me. "What's that?" I called after him, but the door had closed. He came back again with the boiled mutton, and I was so excited by

the appetising smell of it that I forgot the noise of the beast forthwith.

After a day of alternate sleep and feeding I was so far recovered as to be able to get from my bunk to the scuttle and see the green seas trying to keep pace with us. I judged the schooner was running before the wind. Montgomery—that was the name of the flaxen-haired man—came in again as I stood there, and I asked him for some clothes. He lent me some duck things of his own, for those I had worn in the boat, he said, had been thrown overboard. They were rather loose for me, for he was large and long in his limbs.

He told me casually that the captain was three parts drunk in his own cabin. As I assumed the clothes I began asking him some questions about the destination of the ship. He said the ship was bound to Hawaii, but that it had to land him first.

"Where?" said I.

"It's an island. . . . Where I live. So far as I know, it hasn't got a name."

He stared at me with his nether lip dropping, and looked so wilfully stupid of a sudden that it came into my head that he desired to avoid my questions. "I'm ready," I said. He led the way out of the cabin.