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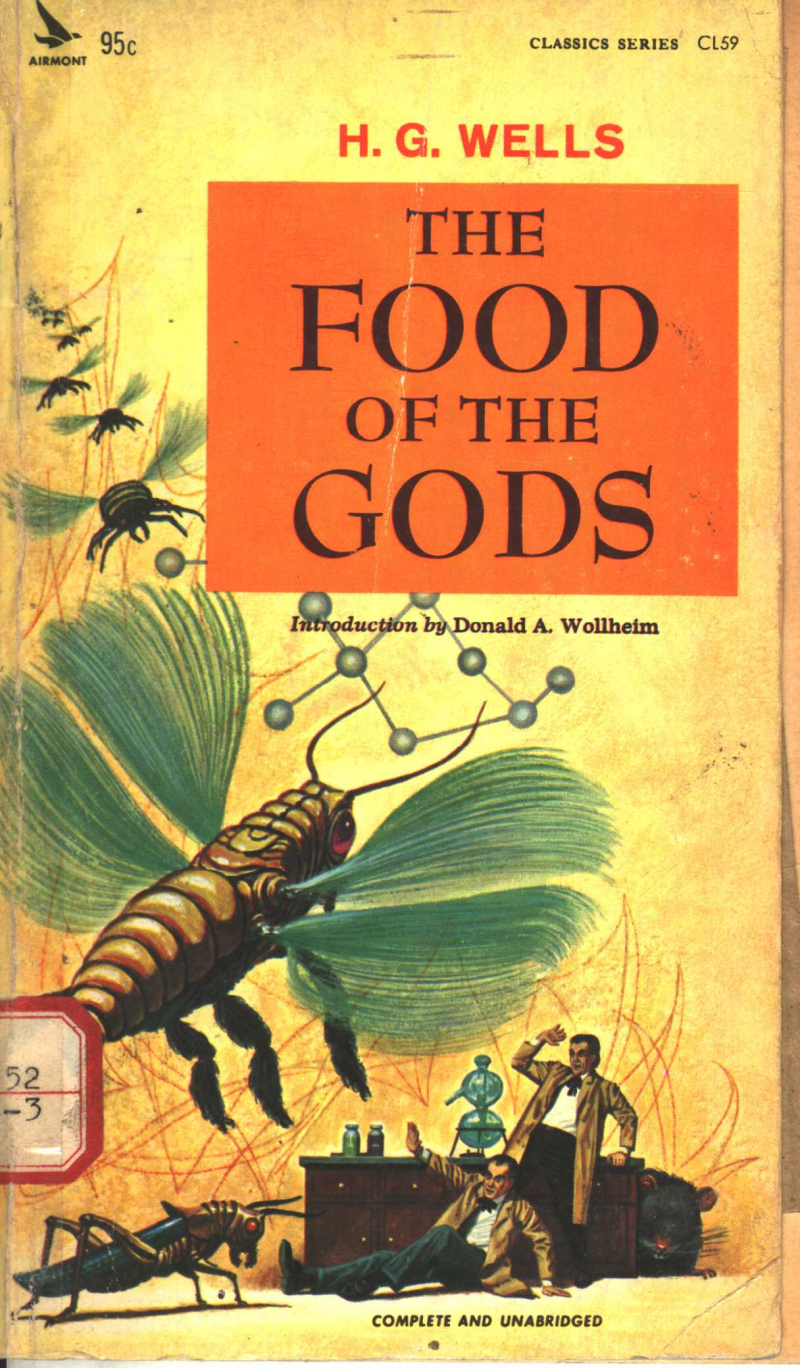
H. G. WELLS

THE FOOD OF THE GODS

Introduction by Donald A. Wollheim



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE FOOD of THE GODS

H. G. WELLS.

Introduction

On September 21, 1866, in a room adjacent to a small store in Bromley, England, a son was born to the storekeeper and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Wells. No one in Bromley would have supposed that there was the slightest chance the newborn child would ever amount to much more than his parents, who were relatively poor people of what that day would style the lower class. In the late nineteenth century, you got the education your parents could afford, and it would be an education suitable to the station in life into which you were born. The Wells's son—Herbert George—presumably would get some training in accounts and bookkeeping, and learn how to run some sort of shop.

His parents' store failed, however, and they went "into service" at a wealthy estate at Up Park. Because of this, the boy found—in this proximity to his "betters"—a first contact with the world of thought and writing he might never have had in Bromley. There, at Up Park, he took his grammar school training, and showed evidence of his literary talent by publishing an amateur journal. The brightness of the boy was thwarted when finances forced him to be ap-

prenticed to a dry goods shop—a draper's, as the British call it. (For the rest of his life, H. G. Wells was subjected to snubs from the well-born as "that draper's assistant.")

Studying in his spare time—and there was precious little of that—H. G. Wells finally qualified as an assistant tutor at a school where he also managed to fill in the gaps of his education sufficiently well to obtain a scholarship at the Normal School of Science—a college from which he emerged with high honors and a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. This son of shopkeepers was afloat, though precariously at first, in the world of ideas, science, and books.

In this ocean he was to rise to become one of the great names of English literature and one of the great leaders of progressive thinking for the remainder of his life. At first a tutor, then a journalist, finally his novel, *The Time Machine,* projected him into the public eye in 1895.

He was to write short stories and novels in the field of science-fiction for most of his lifetime, but the bulk of his contributions to that field was to come in the next ten years, when he laid the patterns for much of the science-fantasies such as we have today. As an innovator of ideas, Wells is unparalleled. Virtually by himself, he established and explored each of the main patterns of the scientific romance.

In *The Time Machine,* he developed and explored the idea of time travel and presented a picture of the far future and the world's end. In *The War of the Worlds,* he startled his readers with the concept of other inhabited planets and their impact on us—this was the first really great "invasion-from-space" novel. In *The Island of Dr. Moreau,* he brought forth the prototype of the mad scientist and the maker of monsters which reaped such a heavy harvest in movies sixty years later.

The First Men in the Moon posed the question of an anti-gravity space vehicle, explored the thought that the Moon might be honeycombed and habitable on the inside, and considered a society of intelligent beings patterned after the ant world. *The Invisible Man* projected what it might be like to

be invisible. *When the Sleeper Wakes* gave us time travel by suspended animation and a horrific social satire of commercialism gone rampant. *The War in the Air* was an astonishingly perceptive vision of the impact of aircraft on warfare.

In his many short stories, H. G. Wells continued to pioneer imaginative ideas, such as the so-called Fourth Dimension, the speeding up of human metabolism, what life was like in cave-man days, the impact of super-surgery, and a surprising number of other unique ideas—all ahead of their time, all thought-provoking, all basic to the world that was coming to bloom in the middle of the twentieth century—which he was not quite destined to live to see, dying at the age of eighty, in 1946.

But H. G. Wells, while projecting scientific fantasies, was also active in trying to put his visions into political action. He was one of those instrumental in shaping the early Utopian views of the newly formed British Labor Party, which today is one of the two great parties of Britain (and very roughly analogous to the Democratic Party in the United States). He wrote extensively of his belief that humanity should, because of the march of science, eventually unite in one great world federation and establish a world-wide society of prosperity and peace.

(As he grew older, Wells was to become more exasperated at the obstinacy of the world in not accepting his every suggestion for social betterment. Toward the last few years of his life, the fact that politically the world was not rushing rapidly toward Utopia made him bitter, a characteristic of the disappointment of the dreamer who in his purity of vision fails to see the hesitancy of the average man and underestimates the complexity of mass movement.)

This idealistic vision began to occupy more and more of his writing, and in such later novels as *Men Like Gods* and *The Shape of Things to Come,* he shows his readers how things could be if we would only heed what he had to say.

The Food of the Gods is almost the last of his early great

science-fiction novels; it was written when Wells was already in the throes of his political activities. It is a novel that stirs the imagination with a marvelous theme—what would happen if we simply did not stop growing? It tells of two biologists who discover a special food which will change the rate of growth, so that instead of proceeding in fits and starts—that is, in short spurts of growth followed by periods of quiescence, the way things really work in nature—the rate of growth would be steady and constant.

Whatever the motive of the biologists, the food gets out of hand, for Wells early recognized the natural capacities of men to fumble everything. Wasps get into it, rats, vegetation, weeds, and the helpless baby son of an unsuspecting farmer. And what started off as an experiment soon developed into a powerful and gripping novel of gigantic men and monsters in a world which had no place for them.

Wells showed his ambivalence here. On the one hand, his imagination was intrigued by the prospects of this type of biological experiment. But as a social scientist he could not help utilizing the story to instill some of his idealism. It comes into *The Food of the Gods* in a strangely impressive way.

For what he says is, see what would happen if you could rise above all this petty business of life and see the vaster horizons. While common people grub about on their daily chores like so many ants scurrying after crumbs, the really great mind can soar into the sky and see what lies ahead; can, in effect, see the forest itself and not just the surrounding trees.

The latter sections of this book contain some of H. G. Wells's finest and most poetic passages. He brings his giant men to us in such a way that, while we do not always understand them, we can feel for them a sympathy for that which is trying to reach out above our own capacities. The author says again and again to us, try to think *big*. The world is important, you are important, but only if you can think on the larger scale. Get above your own little immediate

problems and think of the greater things, the centuries behind us and the tremendous promise of the centuries ahead. That, he says in effect, is what is really important, for if you cannot think on a vast horizon-spanning scale like Cossar's sons, then you are wasting your life.

"Look," he writes, "behind the grotesque shapes and accidents of the present, the coming world of giants and all the mighty things the future has in store—vague and splendid, like some glittering palace seen suddenly in the passing of a sunbeam far away."

And, indeed, he was right, for the world of the twentieth century proved to be a world of giant discoveries and giant possibilities, of horizons that now stretch to the planets and the stars, and power that taps the very energy of the atoms. These are the things he visioned through Cossar's eyes and we are already living among them.

But, he adds, we cannot live among these things and continue to keep our eyes on nothing but our own little lives, our own little petty concerns. If the world has become infinite and big, we must learn to do and think likewise, or else we will be in the position of poor Caddles, the giant who could not understand, who wandered about in bewilderment constantly asking, "What's it all *for?*"

This is what *The Food of the Gods* is also asking. A great, a vivid novel of an astounding scientific experiment and the creation of a super-race, it nevertheless poses that question to each of us—what's it all *for?* Then, in an unforgettable final chapter, H. G. Wells, in one of his most inspired poetical moments, gives us his answer.

If, for a moment, *The Food of the Gods* comes alive for each reader, making him for that brief while rise mentally as a giant surveying the universe, then the dream of H. G. Wells will never be entirely in vain. For that surely is the true essence of all great science-fiction—that it broadens the mental vision the better to cope with the infinite horizons of today and tomorrow.

—DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

The FOOD of the GODS

H. G. WELLS

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BOOK I

The Dawn of the Food

CHAPTER THE FIRST

THE DISCOVERY OF THE FOOD

1

In the middle years of the nineteenth century there first became abundant in this strange world of ours a class of men, men tending for the most part to become elderly, who are called, and who, though they dislike it extremely, are very properly called "Scientists." They dislike that word so much that from the columns of *Nature*, which was from the first their distinctive and characteristic paper, it is as carefully excluded as if it were—that other word which is the basis of all really bad language in this country. But the Great Public and its Press know better, and "Scientists" they are, and when they emerge to any sort of publicity, "distinguished scientists" and "eminent scientists" and "well-known scientists" is the very least we can call them.

Certainly both Mr. Bensington and Professor Redwood quite merited any of these terms long before they came upon the marvellous discovery of which this story tells. Mr. Bensington was a Fellow of the Royal Society and a former president of the Chemical Society, and Professor Redwood was Professor of Physiology in the Bond Street College of the London University and

had been grossly libelled by the anti-vivisectionists time after time. And both had led lives of academic distinction from their very earliest youth.

They were of course quite undistinguished-looking men, as indeed all true Scientists are. There is more personal distinction about the mildest-mannered actor alive than there is about the entire Royal Society. Mr. Bensington was short and very, very bald, and he stooped slightly; he wore gold-rimmed spectacles and cloth boots that were abundantly cut open because of his numerous corns, and Professor Redwood was entirely ordinary in his appearance. Until they happened upon the Food of the Gods (as I must insist upon calling it) they led lives of such eminent and studious obscurity that it is hard to find anything whatever to tell the reader about them.

Mr. Bensington won his spurs (if one may use such an expression of a gentleman in boots of slashed cloth) by his splendid researches upon the More Toxic Alkaloids, and Professor Redwood rose to eminence—I do not clearly remember how he rose to eminence. I know he was very eminent, and that's all. But I fancy it was a voluminous work on Reaction Times with numerous plates of sphygmograph tracings (I write subject to correction) and an admirable new terminology that did the thing for him.

The general public saw little or nothing of either of these gentlemen. Sometimes at such places as the Royal Institution and the Society of Arts it did in a sort of way see Mr. Bensington, or at least his blushing baldness and something of his collar and coat, and hear fragments of a lecture or paper that he imagined himself to be reading audibly; and once I remember—one midday in the vanished past—when the British Association was at Dover, coming on Section C. or D. or some such letter, which had taken up its quarters in a public-house, and following out of mere curiosity, two serious-looking ladies with paper parcels through a door labelled "Billiards" and "Pool" into a scandalous darkness, broken only by a magic-lantern circle of Redwood's tracings.

I watched the lantern slides come and go, and listened to a voice (I forget what it was saying) which I believe was the voice of Professor Redwood, and there was a sizzling from the lantern and another sound that kept me there, still out of curiosity, until the lights were unexpectedly turned up. And then I perceived that this sound was the sound of the munching of buns and sandwiches and things that the assembled British Associates had come there to eat under cover of the magic-lantern darkness.

And Redwood I remember went on talking all the time the lights were up and dabbing at the place where his diagram ought to have been visible on the screen—and so it was again so soon

as the darkness was restored. I remember him then as a most ordinary, slightly nervous-looking dark man, with an air of being preoccupied with something else and doing what he was doing just then under an unaccountable sense of duty.

I heard Bensington also once—in the old days—at an educational conference in Bloomsbury. Like most eminent chemists and botanists, Mr. Bensington was very authoritative upon teaching—though I am certain he would have been scared out of his wits by an average Board School class in half-an-hour—and so far as I can remember now, he was propounding an improvement of Professor Armstrong's Heuristic method, whereby at the cost of three or four hundred pounds' worth of apparatus, a total neglect of all other studies and the undivided attention of a teacher of exceptional gifts, an average child might with a peculiar sort of thumby thoroughness acquire in the course of ten or twelve years almost as much chemistry as one could learn from one of those objectionable shilling text-books that were then so common at that date. . . .

Quite ordinary persons you perceive, both of them, outside their science. Or if anything on the unpractical side of ordinary. And that you will find is the case with "scientists" as a class all the world over. What there is great about them is an annoyance to their fellow scientists and a mystery to the general public, and what is not is evident.

There is no doubt about what is not great, no race of men have such obvious littlenesses. They live, so far as their human intercourse goes, in a narrow world; their researches involve infinite attention and an almost monastic seclusion; and what is left over is not very much. To witness some queer, shy, misshapen, grey-headed, self-important little discoverer of great discoveries, ridiculously adorned with the wide ribbon of an order of chivalry and holding a reception of his fellow men, or to read the anguish of *Nature* at the "neglect of science" when the angel of the birthday honours passes the Royal Society by, or to listen to one indefatigable lichenologist commenting on the work of another indefatigable lichenologist, such things force one to realise the unfaltering littleness of men.

And withal the reef of science that these little "scientists" built and are yet building is so wonderful, so portentous, so full of mysterious half-shapen promises for the mighty future of man! They do not seem to realise the things they are doing. No doubt long ago even Mr. Bensington, when he chose this calling, when he consecrated his life to the alkaloids and their kindred compounds, had some inkling of the vision—more than an inkling. Without some great inspiration, for such glories and positions only as a "scientist" may expect, what young man would have given his life to this work, as young men do? No, they *must* have seen the glory, they must have had the vision, but so

near that it has blinded them. The splendour has blinded them, mercifully, so that for the rest of their lives they can hold the light of knowledge in comfort—that we may see.

And perhaps it accounts for Redwood's touch of preoccupation, that—there can be no doubt of it now—he among his fellows was different; he was different inasmuch as something of the vision still lingered in his eyes.

2

The Food of the Gods I call it, this substance that Mr. Bensington and Professor Redwood made between them; and having regard now to what it has already done and all that it is certainly going to do, there is surely no exaggeration in the name. But Mr. Bensington would no more have called it by that name in cold blood than he would have gone out from his flat in Sloane Street clad in regal scarlet and a wreath of laurel. The phrase was a mere first cry of astonishment from him. He called it the Food of the Gods in his enthusiasm, and for an hour or so at the most altogether. After that he decided he was being absurd. When he first thought of the thing he saw, as it were, a vista of enormous possibilities—literally enormous possibilities, but upon this dazzling vista, after one stare of amazement, he resolutely shut his eyes even as a conscientious "scientist" should. After that, the Food of the Gods sounded blatant to the pitch of indecency. He was surprised he had used the expression. Yet for all that something of that clear-eyed moment hung about him and broke out ever and again. . . .

"Really, you know," he said, rubbing his hands together and laughing nervously, "it has more than a theoretical interest.

"For example," he confided, bringing his face close to the Professor's and dropping to an undertone, "it would perhaps, if suitably handled, sell. . . .

"Precisely," he said, walking away—"as a Food. Or at least a food ingredient.

"Assuming of course that it is palatable. A thing we cannot know till we have prepared it."

He turned upon the hearthrug, and studied the carefully designated slits upon his cloth shoes.

"Name?" he said, looking up in response to an inquiry. "For my part I incline to the good old classical allusion. It—it makes Science res— Gives it a touch of old-fashioned dignity. I have been thinking. . . . I don't know if you will think it absurd of me. . . . A little fancy is surely occasionally permissible. . . . Herakleophorbia. Eh? The nutrition of a possible Hercules? You know it *might* . . .

"Of course if you think *not*——"

Redwood reflected with his eyes on the fire and made no objection.

"You think it would do?"

Redwood moved his head gravely.

"It might be Titanophorbia, you know. Food of Titans. . . . You prefer the former?

"You're quite sure you don't think it a little *too*——"

"No."

"Ah! I'm glad."

And so they called it Herakleophorbia throughout their investigations, and in their report—the report that was never published, because of the unexpected developments that upset all their arrangements, it is invariably written in that way. There were three kindred substances prepared before they hit on the one their speculations had foretold, and these they spoke of as Herakleophorbia I., Herakleophorbia II., and Herakleophorbia III. It is Herakleophorbia IV. which I—insisting upon Bensington's original name—call here the Food of the Gods.

3

The idea was Mr. Bensington's. But as it was suggested to him by one of Professor Redwood's contributions to the Philosophical Transactions, he very properly consulted that gentleman before he carried it further. Besides which it was, as a research, a physiological quite as much as a chemical inquiry.

Professor Redwood was one of those scientific men who are addicted to tracings and curves. You are familiar—if you are at all the sort of reader I like—with the sort of scientific paper I mean. It is a paper you cannot make head nor tail of, and at the end come five or six long folded diagrams that open out and show peculiar zigzag tracings, flashes of lightning overdone, or sinuous inexplicable things called "smoothed curves" set up on ordinates and rooting in abscissæ—and things like that. You puzzle over the thing for a long time and end with the suspicion that not only do you not understand it but that the author does not understand it either. But really you know many of these scientific people understand the meaning of their own papers quite well, it is simply a defect of expression that raises the obstacle between us.

I am inclined to think that Redwood thought in tracings and curves. And after his monumental work upon Reaction Times (the unscientific reader is exhorted to stick to it for a little bit longer and everything will be as clear as daylight) Redwood began to turn out smoothed curves and sphygmographeries upon Growth, and it was one of his papers upon Growth that really gave Mr. Bensington his idea.

Redwood, you know, had been measuring growing things of all sorts, kittens, puppies, sunflowers, mushrooms, bean plants and (until his wife put a stop to it) his baby, and he showed that growth went on, not a regular pace, or, as he put he put it, so:

but with bursts and intermissions of this sort,

and that apparently nothing grew regularly and steadily, and so far as he could make out nothing could grow regularly and steadily; it was as if every living thing had first to accumulate force to grow, grew with vigour only for a time and then had to wait for a space before it could go on growing again. And in the muffled and highly technical language of the really careful "scientist," Redwood suggested that the process of growth probably demanded the presence of a considerable quantity of some necessary substance in the blood that was only formed very slowly, and that when this substance was used up by growth, it was only very slowly replaced, and that meanwhile the organism had to mark time. He compared his unknown substance to oil in machinery. A growing animal was rather like an engine, he suggested, that can move a certain distance and must then be oiled before it can run again. ("But why shouldn't one oil the engine from without?" said Mr. Bensington, when he read the paper.) And all this, said Redwood, with the delightful nervous inconsecutiveness of his class, might very probably be found to throw a light upon the mystery of certain of the ductless glands. As though they had anything to do with it all!

In a subsequent communication Redwood went further. He gave a perfect Brock's benefit of diagrams—exactly like rocket trajectories they were, and the gist of it—so far as it had any gist—was the blood of puppies and kittens and the sap of sunflowers and the juice of mushrooms in what he called the "growing phase" differed as to the proportions of certain elements from their blood and sap on the days when they were not particularly growing.

And when Mr. Bensington, after holding the diagrams sideways and upside down, began to see what this difference was, a