

CLASSICS TO GO



**THE FUTURE IN
AMERICA**
A SEARCH AFTER REALITIES

H. G. WELLS

The Future in America

A Search After Realities

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FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

ILLUSTRATIONS

FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK *Frontispiece*

ENTRANCE TO BROOKLYN BRIDGE

STATE STREET, CHICAGO

WESTERN FARMERS STILL OWN THEIR FARMS

PLUMP AND PRETTY PUPILS OF
EXTRAVAGANCE

NEW YORK'S CROWDED, LITTERED EAST SIDE

BREAKER BOYS AT A PENNSYLVANIA COLLIERY

INTERIOR OF A NEW YORK OFFICE BUILDING

WHERE IMMIGRANT CHILDREN ARE
AMERICANIZED

HARVARD HALL AND THE JOHNSON GATE,
CAMBRIDGE

A BIT OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

IN THE CONGRESSIONAL LIBRARY

CHAPTER I

THE PROPHETIC HABIT OF MIND

(At a writing-desk in Sandgate)

I

The Question

"ARE you a Polygamist?"

"Are you an Anarchist?"

The questions seem impertinent. They are part of a long paper of interrogations I must answer satisfactorily if I am to be regarded as a desirable alien to enter the United States of America. I want very much to pass that great statue of Liberty illuminating the World (from a central position in New York Harbor), in order to see things in its light, to talk to certain people, to appreciate certain atmospheres, and so I resist the provocation to answer impertinently. I do not even volunteer that I do not smoke and am a total abstainer; on which points it would seem the States as a whole still keep an open mind. I am full of curiosity about America, I am possessed by a problem I feel I cannot adequately discuss even with myself except over there, and I must go even at the price of coming to a decision upon the theoretically open questions these two inquiries raise.

My problem I know will seem ridiculous and monstrous when I give it in all its stark disproportions—attacked by me with my equipment it will call up an image of an elephant assailed by an ant who has not even mastered Jiu-jitsu—but at any rate I've come to it in a natural sort of way and it is one I must, for my own peace of mind, make some kind of attempt upon, even if at last it means no more than the ant crawling in an exploratory way hither and thither over that

vast unconscious carcass and finally getting down and going away. That may be rather good for the ant, and the experience may be of interest to other ants, however infinitesimal from the point of view of the elephant, the final value of his investigation may be. And this tremendous problem in my case and now in this—simply; What is going to happen to the United States of America in the next thirty years or so?

I do not know if the reader has ever happened upon any books or writings of mine before, but if, what is highly probable, he has not, he may be curious to know how it is that any human being should be running about in so colossally an interrogative state of mind. (For even the present inquiry is by no means my maximum limit). And the explanation is to be found a little in a mental idiosyncrasy perhaps, but much more in the development of a special way of thinking, of a habit of mind.

That habit of mind may be indicated by a proposition that, with a fine air of discovery, I threw out some years ago, in a happy ignorance that I had been anticipated by no less a person than Heraclitus. "There is no Being but Becoming," that was what appeared to my unscholarly mind to be almost triumphantly new. I have since then informed myself more fully about Heraclitus, there are moments now when I more than half suspect that all the thinking I shall ever do will simply serve to illuminate my understanding of him, but at any rate that apothegm of his does exactly convey the intellectual attitude into which I fall. I am curiously not interested in things, and curiously interested in the consequences of things. I wouldn't for the world go to see the United States for what they are—if I had sound reason for supposing that the entire western hemisphere was to be destroyed next Christmas, I should not, I think, be among the multitude that would rush for one last look at that great spectacle,—from which it follows naturally that I don't

propose to see Niagara. I should much more probably turn an inquiring visage eastward, with the west so certainly provided for. I have come to be, I am afraid, even a little insensitive to fine immediate things through this anticipatory habit.

This habit of mind confronts and perplexes my sense of things that simply *are*, with my brooding preoccupation with how they will shape presently, what they will lead to, what seed they will sow and how they will wear. At times, I can assure the reader, this quality approaches otherworldliness, in its constant reference to an all-important here-after. There are times indeed when it makes life seem so transparent and flimsy, seem so dissolving, so passing on to an equally transitory series of consequences, that the enhanced sense of instability becomes restlessness and distress; but on the other hand nothing that exists, nothing whatever, remains altogether vulgar or dull and dead or hopeless in its light. But the interest is shifted. The pomp and splendor of established order, the braying triumphs, ceremonies, consummations, one sees these glittering shows for what they are—through their threadbare grandeur shine the little significant things that will make the future....

And now that I am associating myself with great names, let me discover that I find this characteristic turn of mind of mine, not only in Heraclitus, the most fragmentary of philosophers, but for one fine passage at any rate, in Mr. Henry James, the least fragmentary of novelists. In his recent impressions of America I find him apostrophizing the great mansions of Fifth Avenue, in words quite after my heart;—

"It's all very well," he writes, "for you to look as if, since you've had no past, you're going in, as the next best thing, for a magnificent compensatory future. What are you going to make your future *of*, for all your airs, we want to know?"

What elements of a future, as futures have gone in the great world, are at all assured to you?"

I had already when I read that, figured myself as addressing if not these particular last triumphs of the fine Transatlantic art of architecture, then at least America in general in some such words. It is not unpleasant to be anticipated by the chief Master of one's craft, it is indeed, when one reflects upon his peculiar intimacy with this problem, enormously reassuring, and so I have very gladly annexed his phrasing and put it here to honor and adorn and in a manner to explain my own enterprise. I have already studied some of these fine buildings through the mediation of an illustrated magazine—they appear solid, they appear wonderful and well done to the highest pitch—and before many days now I shall, I hope, reconstruct that particular moment, stand—the latest admirer from England—regarding these portentous magnificences, from the same sidewalk—will they call it?—as my illustrious predecessor, and with his question ringing in my mind all the louder for their proximity, and the universally acknowledged invigoration of the American atmosphere. "What are you going to make your future *of*, for all your airs?"

And then I suppose I shall return to crane my neck at the Flat-Iron Building or the *Times* sky-scraper, and ask all that too, an identical question.

II

Philosophical

CERTAIN phases in the development of these prophetic exercises one may perhaps be permitted to trace.

To begin with, I remember 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. As I saw it, it was to be a strictly protestant and individualistic judgment, each soul upon its personal merits. 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 gayly nonsensical as fairy-land....

I was a student of biology before I realized that this, my finite and conclusive End, at least in the material and chronological form, had somehow vanished from the scheme of things. In the place of it had come a blackness and a vagueness about the endless vista of years ahead, that was tremendous—that terrified. That is a phase in which lots of educated people remain to this day. "All this scheme of things, life, force, destiny which began not six thousand years, mark you, but an infinity ago, that has developed out of such strange weird shapes and incredible first intentions, out of gaseous nebulæ, carboniferous swamps, saurian giantry and arboreal apes, is by the same tokens to continue, developing—into what?" That was the overwhelming riddle that came to me, with that realization of an End averted, that has come now to most of our world.

The phase that followed the first helpless stare of the mind was a wild effort to express one's sudden apprehension of unlimited possibility. One made fantastic exaggerations, fantastic inversions of all recognized things. Anything of this sort might come, anything of any sort. The books about the future that followed the first stimulus of the world's realization of the implications of Darwinian science, have all something of the monstrous experimental imaginings of children. I myself, in my microcosmic way, duplicated the times. Almost the first thing I ever wrote—it survives in an

altered form as one of a bookful of essays,—was of this type; "The Man of the Year Million," was presented as a sort of pantomime head and a shrivelled body, and years after that, the *Time Machine*, my first published book, ran in the same vein. At that point, at a brief astonished stare down the vistas of time-to-come, at something between wonder and amazed, incredulous, defeated laughter, most people, I think, stop. But those who are doomed to the prophetic habit of mind go on.

The next phase, the third phase, is to shorten the range of the outlook, to attempt something a little more proximate than the final destiny of man. One becomes more systematic, one sets to work to trace the great changes of the last century or so, and one produces these in a straight line and according to the rule of three. If the maximum velocity of land travel in 1800 was twelve miles an hour and in 1900 (let us say) sixty miles an hour, then one concludes that in 2000 A.D. it will be three hundred miles an hour. If the population of America in 1800—but I refrain from this second instance. In that fashion one got out a sort of gigantesque caricature of the existing world, everything swollen to vast proportions and massive beyond measure. In my case that phase produced a book, *When the Sleeper Wakes*, in which, I am told, by competent New-Yorkers, that I, starting with London, an unbiassed mind, this rule-of-three method and my otherwise unaided imagination, produced something more like Chicago than any other place wherein righteous men are likely to be found. That I shall verify in due course, but my present point is merely that to write such a book is to discover how thoroughly wrong this all too obvious method of enlarging the present is.

One goes on therefore—if one is to succumb altogether to the prophetic habit—to a really "scientific" attack upon the future. The "scientific" phase is not final, but it is far more abundantly fruitful than its predecessors. One attempts a

rude wide analysis of contemporary history, one seeks to clear and detach operating causes and to work them out, and so, combining this necessary set of consequences with that, to achieve a synthetic forecast in terms just as broad and general and vague as the causes considered are few. I made, it happens, an experiment in this scientific sort of prophecy in a book called *Anticipations*, and I gave an altogether excessive exposition and defence of it, I went altogether too far in this direction, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, "The Discovery of the Future," that survives in odd corners as a pamphlet, and is to be found, like a scrap of old newspaper in the roof gutter of a museum, in *Nature* (vol. LXV., p. 326) and in the Smithsonian Report (for 1902). Within certain limits, however, I still believe this scientific method is sound. It gives sound results in many cases, results at any rate as sound as those one gets from the "laws" of political economy; one can claim it really does effect a sort of prophecy on the material side of life.

For example, it was quite obvious about 1899 that invention and enterprise were very busy with the means of locomotion, and one could deduce from that certain practically inevitable consequences in the distribution of urban populations. With easier, quicker means of getting about there were endless reasons, hygienic, social, economic, why people should move from the town centres towards their peripheries, and very few why they should not. The towns one inferred therefore, would get slacker, more diffused, the countryside more urban. From that, from the spatial widening of personal interests that ensued, one could infer certain changes in the spirits of local politics, and so one went on to a number of fairly valid adumbrations. Then again starting from the practical supersession in the long run of all unskilled labor by machinery one can work out with a pretty fair certainty many coming social developments, and the broad trend of one group of

influences at least from the moral attitude of the mass of common people. In industry, in domestic life again, one foresees a steady development of complex appliances, demanding, and indeed in an epoch of frequently changing methods *forcing*, a flexible understanding, versatility of effort, a universal rising standard of education. So too a study of military methods and apparatus convinces one of the necessary transfer of power in the coming century from the ignorant and enthusiastic masses who made the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and won Napoleon his wars, to any more deliberate, more intelligent and more disciplined class that may possess an organized purpose. But where will one find that class? There comes a question that goes outside science, that takes one at once into a field beyond the range of the "scientific" method altogether.

So long as one adopts the assumptions of the old political economist and assumes men without idiosyncrasy, without prejudices, without, as people say, wills of their own, so long as one imagines a perfectly acquiescent humanity that will always in the long run under pressure liquefy and stream along the line of least resistance to its own material advantage, the business of prophecy is easy. But from the first I felt distrust for that facility in prophesying, I perceived that always there lurked something, an incalculable opposition to these mechanically conceived forces, in law, in usage and prejudice, in the poiëtic power of exceptional individual men. I discovered for myself over again, the inseparable nature of the two functions of the prophet. In my *Anticipations*, for example, I had intended simply to work out and foretell, and before I had finished I was in a fine full blast of exhortation....

That by an easy transition brought me to the last stage in the life history of the prophetic mind, as it is at present known to me. One comes out on the other side of the

"scientific" method, into the large temperance, the valiant inconclusiveness, the released creativeness of philosophy. Much may be foretold as certain, much more as possible, but the last decisions and the greatest decisions, lie in the hearts and wills of unique incalculable men. With them we have to deal as our ultimate reality in all these matters, and our methods have to be not "scientific" at all for all the greater issues, the humanly important issues, but critical, literary, even if you will—artistic. Here insight is of more account than induction and the perception of fine tones than the counting of heads. Science deals with necessity and necessity is here but the firm ground on which our freedom goes. One passes from affairs of predestination to affairs of free will.

This discovery spread at once beyond the field of prophesying. The end, the aim, the test of science, as a model man understands the word, is foretelling by means of "laws," and my error in attempting a complete "scientific" forecast of human affairs arose in too careless an assent to the ideas about me, and from accepting uncritically such claims as that history should be "scientific," and that economics and sociology (for example) are "sciences." Directly one gauges the fuller implications of that uniqueness of individuals Darwin's work has so permanently illuminated, one passes beyond that. The ripened prophet realizes Schopenhauer—as indeed I find Professor Münsterberg saying. "The deepest sense of human affairs is reached," he writes, "when we consider them not as appearances but as decisions." There one has the same thing coming to meet one from the psychological side....

But my present business isn't to go into this shadowy, metaphysical foundation world on which our thinking rests, but to the brightly lit overworld of America. This philosophical excursion is set here just to prepare the reader quite frankly for speculations and to disabuse his mind of

the idea that in writing of the Future in America I'm going to write of houses a hundred stories high and flying-machines in warfare and things like that. I am not going to America to work a pretentious horoscope, to discover a Destiny, but to find out what I can of what must needs make that Destiny,— a great nation's Will.

III

The Will of America

THE material factors in a nation's future are subordinate factors, they present advantages, such as the easy access of the English to coal and the sea, or disadvantages, such as the ice-bound seaboard of the Russians, but these are the circumstances and not necessarily the rulers of its fate. The essential factor in the destiny of a nation, as of a man and of mankind, lies in the form of its will and in the quality and quantity of its will. The drama of a nation's future, as of a man's, lies in this conflict of its will with what would else be "scientifically" predictable, materially inevitable. If the man, if the nation was an automaton fitted with good average motives, so and so, one could say exactly, would be done. It's just where the thing isn't automatic that our present interest comes in.

I might perhaps reverse the order of the three aspects of will I have named, for manifestly where the quantity of will is small, it matters nothing what the form or quality. The man or the people that wills feebly is the sport of every circumstance, and there if anywhere the scientific method holds truest or even altogether true. Do geographical positions or mineral resources make for riches? Then such a people will grow insecurely and disastrously rich. Is an abundant prolific life at a low level indicated? They will pullulate and suffer. If circumstances make for a choice between comfort and reproduction, your feeble people will dwindle and pass; if war, if conquest tempt them then they

will turn from all preoccupations and follow the drums. Little things provoke their unstable equilibrium, to hostility, to forgiveness....

And be it noted that the quantity of will in a nation is not necessarily determined by adding up the wills of all its people. I am told, and I am disposed to believe it, that the Americans of the United States are a people of great individual force of will, the clear strong faces of many young Americans, something almost Roman in the faces of their statesmen and politicians, a distinctive quality I detect in such Americans as I have met, a quality of sharply cut determination even though it be only about details and secondary things, that one must rouse one's self to meet, inclines me to give a provisional credit to that, but how far does all this possible will-force aggregate to a great national purpose?—what algebraically does it add up to when this and that have cancelled each other? That may be a different thing altogether.

And next to this net quantity of will a nation or people may possess, come the questions of its quality, its flexibility, its consciousness and intellectuality. A nation may be full of will and yet inflexibly and disastrously stupid in the expression of that will. There was probably more will-power, mere haughty and determined self-assertion in the young bull that charged the railway engine than in several regiments of men, but it was after all a low quality of will with no method but a violent and injudicious directness, and in the end it was suicidal and futile. There again is the substance for ramifying Enquiries. How subtle, how collected and patient, how far capable of a long plan, is this American nation? Suppose it has a will so powerful and with such resources that whatever simple end may be attained by rushing upon it is America's for the asking, there still remains the far more important question of the ends that are not obvious, that

are intricate and complex and not to be won by booms and cataclysms of effort.

An Englishman comes to think that most of the permanent and precious things for which a nation's effort goes are like that, and here too I have an open mind and unsatisfied curiosities.

And lastly there is the form of the nation's purpose. I have been reading what I can find about that in books for some time, and now I want to cross over the Atlantic, more particularly for that, to question more or less openly certain Americans, not only men and women, but the mute expressive presences of house and appliance, of statue, flag and public building, and the large collective visages of crowds, what it is all up to, what it thinks it is all after, how far it means to escape or improve upon its purely material destinies? I want over there to find whatever consciousness or vague consciousness of a common purpose there may be, what is their Vision, their American Utopia, how much will there is shaping to attain it, how much capacity goes with the will—what, in short, there is in America, over and above the mere mechanical consequences of scattering multitudes of energetic Europeans athwart a vast healthy, productive and practically empty continent in the temperate zone. There you have the terms of reference of an enquiry, that is I admit (as Mr. Morgan Richards the eminent advertisement agent would say), "mammoth in character."

The American reader may very reasonably inquire at this point why an Englishman does not begin with the future of his own country. The answer is that this particular one has done so, and that in many ways he has found his intimacy and proximity a disadvantage. One knows too much of the things that seem to matter and that ultimately don't, one is full of misleading individual instances intensely seen, one can't see the wood for the trees. One comes to America at

last, not only with the idea of seeing America, but with something more than an incidental hope of getting one's own England there in the distance and as a whole, for the first time in one's life. And the problem of America, from this side anyhow, has an air of being simpler. For all the Philippine adventure her future still seems to lie on the whole compactly in one continent, and not as ours is, dispersed round and about the habitable globe, strangely entangled with India, with Japan, with Africa and with the great antagonism the Germans force upon us at our doors. Moreover one cannot look ten years ahead in England, without glancing across the Atlantic. "There they are," we say to one another, "those Americans! They speak our language, read our books, give us books, share our mind. What we think still goes into their heads in a measure, and their thoughts run through our brains. What will they be up to?"

Our future is extraordinarily bound up in America's and in a sense dependent upon it. It is not that we dream very much of political reunions of Anglo Saxondom and the like. So long as we British retain our wide and accidental sprawl of empire about the earth we cannot expect or desire the Americans to share our stresses and entanglements. Our Empire has its own adventurous and perilous outlook. But our civilization is a different thing from our Empire, a thing that reaches out further into the future, that will be going on changed beyond recognition. Because of our common language, of our common traditions, Americans are a part of our community, are becoming indeed the larger part of our community of thought and feeling and outlook—in a sense far more intimate than any link we have with Hindoo or Copt or Cingalese. A common Englishman has an almost pathetic pride and sense of proprietorship in the States; he is fatally ready to fall in with the idea that two nations that share their past, that still, a little restively, share one language,

may even contrive to share an infinitely more interesting future. Even if he does not chance to be an American now, his grandson may be. America is his inheritance, his reserved accumulating investment. In that sense indeed America belongs to the whole western world; all Europe owns her promise, but to the Englishman the sense of participation is intense. "*We did it,*" he will tell of the most American of achievements, of the settlement of the middle west for example, and this is so far justifiable that numberless men, myself included, are Englishmen, Australian, New-Zealanders, Canadians, instead of being Americans, by the merest accidents of life. My father still possesses the stout oak box he had had made to emigrate withal, everything was arranged that would have got me and my brothers born across the ocean, and only the coincidence of a business opportunity and an illness of my mother's, arrested that. It was so near a thing as that with me, which prevents my blood from boiling with patriotic indignation instead of patriotic solicitude at the frequent sight of red-coats as I see them from my study window going to and fro to Shorncliffe camp.

Well I learn from Professor Münsterberg how vain my sense of proprietorship is, but still this much of it obstinately remains, that I will at any rate *look* at the American future.

By the accidents that delayed that box it comes about that if I want to see what America is up to, I have among other things to buy a Baedeker and a steamer ticket and fill up the inquiring blanks in this remarkable document before me, the long string of questions that begins:—

"Are you a Polygamist?"

"Are you an Anarchist?"

Here I gather is one little indication of the great will I am going to study. It would seem that the United States of

America regard Anarchy and Polygamy with aversion, regard indeed Anarchists and Polygamists as creatures unfit to mingle with the already very various eighty million of citizens who constitute their sovereign powers, and on the other hand hold these creatures so inflexibly honorable as certainly to tell these damning truths about themselves in this matter....

It's a little odd. One has a second or so of doubt about the quality of that particular manifestation of will.

CHAPTER II

MATERIAL PROGRESS

(*On the "Carmania" going Americanward*)

I

American Certitudes

WHEN one talks to an American of his national purpose he seems a little at a loss; if one speaks of his national destiny, he responds with alacrity. I make this generalization on the usual narrow foundations, but so the impression comes to me.

Until this present generation, indeed until within a couple of decades, it is not very evident that Americans did envisage any national purpose at all, except in so far as there was a certain solicitude not to be cheated out of an assured destiny. A sort of optimistic fatalism possessed them. They had, and mostly it seems they still have, a tremendous sense of sustained and assured growth, and it is not altogether untrue that one is told—I have been told—such things as that "America is a great country, sir," that its future is gigantic and that it is already (and going to be more and more so) the greatest country on earth.

I am not the sort of Englishman who questions that. I do so regard that much as obvious and true that it seems to me even a little undignified, as well as a little overbearing, for Americans to insist upon it so; I try to go on as soon as possible to the question just how my interlocutor *shapes* that gigantic future and what that world predominance is finally to do for us in England and all about the world. So far, I must insist, I haven't found anything like an idea. I have looked for it in books, in papers, in speeches and now I am going to look for it in America. At the most I have found