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H. G. WELLS

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INTRODUCTION

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THE NORMALITY OF MR WELLS

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In his Preface to the *Unpleasant Plays*, Mr Shaw boasts his possession of "normal sight." The adjective is the oculist's, and the application of it is Mr Shaw's, but while the phrase is misleading until it is explained to suit a particular purpose, it has a pleasing adaptability, and I can find none better as a key to the works of Mr H.G. Wells.

We need not bungle over the word "normal," in any attempt to meet the academic objection that it implies conformity to type. In this connection, the gifted possessor of normal sight is differentiated from his million neighbours by the fact that he wears no glasses; and if a few happy people still exist here and there who have no need for the mere physical assistance, the number of those whose mental outlook is undistorted by tradition, prejudice or some form of bias is so small that we regard them as inspired or criminal according to the inclination of our own beloved predilection. And no spectacles will correct the mental astigmatism of the multitude, a fact that is often a cause of considerable annoyance to the possessors of normal sight. That defect of vision, whether congenital or induced by the confinements of early training, persists and increases throughout life, like other forms of myopia. The man who

sees a ball as slightly flattened, like a tangerine orange too tightly packed (an "oblate spheroid" would be the physicist's brief description), seeks the society of other men who share his illusion; and the company of them take arms against the opposing faction, which is confirmed in the belief that the ball is egg-shaped, that the bulge, in fact, is not "oblate" but "prolate."

I will not elaborate the parable; it is sufficient to indicate that in my reading of Mr Wells, I have seen him as regarding all life from a reasonable distance. By good fortune he avoided the influences of his early training, which was too ineffectual to leave any permanent mark upon him. His readers may infer, from certain descriptions in *Kipps*, and *The History of Mr Polly*, that Wells himself sincerely regrets the inadequacies of that "private school of dingy aspect and still dingier pretensions, where there were no object lessons, and the studies of book-keeping and French were pursued (but never effectually overtaken) under the guidance of an elderly gentleman, who wore a nondescript gown and took snuff, wrote copperplate, explained nothing, and used a cane with remarkable dexterity and gusto." But, properly considered, that inadequate elderly gentleman may be regarded as our benefactor. If he had been more apt in his methods, he might have influenced the blessed normality of his pupil, and bound upon him the spectacles of his own order. Worse still, Mr Wells might have been born into the leisured classes, and sent to Eton and Christchurch, and if his genius had found any expression after that awful experience, he would probably, at the best, have written

polite essays or a history of Napoleon, during the intervals of his leisured activity as a member of the Upper House.

Happily, Fate provided a scheme for preserving his eyesight, and pitched him into the care of Mr and Mrs Joseph Wells on the 21st September 1866; behind or above a small general shop in Bromley. Mrs Wells was the daughter of an innkeeper at Midhurst and had been in service as a lady's maid before her marriage. Joseph Wells had had a more distinguished career. He had been a great Kent bowler in the early sixties, and it must have been, I think, only the year before the subject of our essay appeared at Bromley that his father took four wickets with consecutive balls and created a new record in the annals of cricket. The late Sir Francis Galton might have made something out of this ancestry; I must confess that it is entirely beyond my powers, although I make the reservation that we know little of the abilities of H.G. Wells' mother. She has not figured as a recognisable portrait in any of his novels.

The Bromley shop, like most of its kind, was a failure. Moderate success might have meant a Grammar School for young Wells, and the temptations of property, but Fate gave our young radical another twist by thrusting him temporarily within sight of an alien and magnificent prosperity, where as the son of the housekeeper at Up Park, near Petersfield, he might recognise his immense separation from the members of the ruling class, as described in *Tono-Bungay*.

After that came "the drapery," first at Windsor and then at Southsea; but we have no autobiography of this period, only the details of the trade and its circumstances. For neither Hoopdriver, nor Kipps, nor Polly could have qualified