

H.G. Wells at Grasse (1924-1933)

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The following interview with Madame Félicie Goletto, cook-housekeeper in the home that Wells set up with Odette Keun in the South of France, was recorded on 25 August 1966.

It should be noted that Wells's own remarks reported by Mme Goletto were originally spoken in French. The interview provides some interesting evidence of his command of that language.

F.G. That's where she was to meet him...in 1924. She went to see him in Geneva — as you know he was there, at the League of Nations...and then they came back. And since Mme Keun knew me, and knew that I had the keys of Lou Bastidou, she said, "We'll go and see Félicie." They arrived, I made them a meal...but I never thought who he was, Mr Wells — he didn't know any French...it was she who did the talking for him.

B.L. So you had met Mme Keun before?

F.G. Yes, through the gentleman who had Lou Bastidou, and who had died. Then Mme Keun and Mr Wells came. And Mr Wells said, "*Oui, mais moi*" (that's all he could say in French at that time), "*moi je achète le Bastidou avec la cuisinière* [with the cook]!" But I thought that what he meant was "with the oven"!

B.L. And you were the "cuisinière"?

F.G. Yes. Because he knew that Madame was no housewife...although she was to some extent, for a person like that! Perhaps he realized that I was more resourceful, though.

B.L. And he took your husband into his service as well?

F.G. Not just then, because they didn't have a car or anything when they came to Lou Bastidou. And they only got a car here, when I said that really, to go to the market, it was too much! Then they bought a Citroën — a B12, I think. And Citroën himself came here! Andre Citroën — as a guest.

B.L. After all, Wells was interested in industrialists...

F.G. Industrialists and everyone who had been successful. Citroën was a man who had really worked for it! And Voisin came too. Just think: he had sold him a car in Paris, brand new, not run in...and Wells wanted to come down here with it. And, though he didn't know it, Voisin followed him. He was so afraid that something would go wrong — firstly because it was Wells, and then because it was one of his cars. He was so proud to have sold Wells a car! He followed him down here, and then he came to see us; but he never let on that he had followed Wells down here.

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B.L. And how long did they stay at Lou Bastidou?

F.G. Well, we had bought a plot of land, and behind it was our house... Then Mr Wells came to see us, when we had our house-warming — I was already working for him. We had a little dining-room, and I invited them both. I had bought some good wine, and I made quite a spread for them...

He had just bought the piece of land below from us: "I want to be near Maurice [Goletto], and I want to build a house here; nobody will build anything in front, and I shall be left in peace." Yes, he was happy at Lou Pidou. He built that house... There was no central heating. When they had been to spend a couple of days in a hotel, at Monte Carlo for example, maybe twice a year, he was always ill when he got back — because of the central heating! But you see he was never ill at Lou Pidou. That was important, for him. There were lots of fires — it was so complicated. There was no central heating, but plenty of fireplaces, I can tell you!

In the entrance — a very big entrance — there's an imitation fireplace; it has a stone front, and high up on it is written "Two Lovers Built This House"...it's written in old English lettering, and there have even been English people who weren't able to read it.

B.L. Do you remember when they finished building Lou Pidou?

F.G. It was finished...they started when we went there in 1925? The house was started in 1926, and finished in 1927 or 28. But they moved in in 1927, I think.

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B.L. Let me go back a bit. Do you know why he came to Grasse? Why Grasse? Why the South of France — in 1924? Was it Mme Keun who brought him there?

F.G. Yes. Because first of all the climate was very good for him...he loved France. You see, when he was being photographed — on the pictures I've got — he had to say something...All I know is that he said "I am accused of not liking France"; then he said, "Yes, I love France, but I don't like its army, and I like the British Army still less!" Because he wasn't in favour of the army!

B.L. He was a pacifist...

F.G. Yes, because when the Coronation took place in England...the King was going down his street — the procession. Everybody had to put bunting out. Well, since he wasn't a royalist, he closed up his house and came to spend a month down here, with his daughter-in-law and her two children. It was then I saw his grandchildren, at the time of the Coronation. ¹ He said to me — "I won't watch that little beast going past my door!"

You know, one day Madame had bought a meat-chopper, to use at table. You know that in bakeries they cut the bread like that...So she said "You know, Pidou, I bought this, and if the King of England came here I'd use it at table." And he said — "Oh! I hope that little beast won't come into any house of mine!" That was the sort of thing he said. He was no royalist!

- B.L. Roughly how many months a year did he stay at Grasse?
- F.G. As long as Mrs Wells was alive, he stayed...more than half the year.
- B.L. Mainly the winter months?
- F.G. He went home for Christmas. Just like an Englishman! While Mrs Wells was alive, he always went home for Christmas. In all, in Mrs Wells's time, he spent no more than four months in London...in his home.
- B.L. And afterwards? After Mrs Wells's death?
- F.G. After Mrs Wells's death he hardly went to London at all. He spent most of the time here. He went to America and stayed a month...²

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- B.L. Do you remember any particular episodes which happened, at precise dates, between 1924 and 1933?
- F.G. They made a journey... He was going to give a talk in Madrid, and they covered the whole of Spain, with my husband driving. And before going he learnt to speak Spanish...
- B.L. Did he often go to make speeches like that?
- F.G. Oh, he did... The one he gave when they started living together,...at the League of Nations. Once the League of Nations people all came to Lou Pidou...I can still see the dinner I made.

And when I used to cook for him, he said "Félicie, I pray to God that, whether we have people here or whether we're alone, you never take it into your head to make a 'filet diplomate'. Because everywhere we go we always get 'filet diplomate'! You know that's what they serve at all the big dinners..."

He gave a talk in Paris. That's when I went there, in 1929. They had a lovely apartment on the Avenue de Versailles. It was after Mrs Wells's death; he'd brought over some furniture from England. But they only kept it for two years, and afterwards, she didn't want to go there any more.

And so she said to him one day, at table: "You know, I can't keep Félicie on for ever, now that we have a house in Paris... Félicie stays here, of course; she's not coming to Paris, she can't leave the house. And the servants I'll get in Paris won't be there waiting for me when I come back next year! Do you think they will, Pidou?" Then he said "I'm not enough of an expert to know what a servant will be doing next year."

- B.L. Yet he was famous for predicting the future!
- F.G. Well, you know, those were his remarks. He used to make remarks like that; it was nice when he spoke like that! And when she told me the pound was falling, the English pound — "Economise, Félicie! I'd like you not to serve us so many courses." I said "There aren't very many now; if I were to take another one away..." Then Mr Wells — he was quick-tempered sometimes! — said "May I ask whether Félicie cares whether the pound is going up or down?"

Another time, he said, "When we are ruined, we'll set up a health-food restaurant" — because he had diabetes, and I had managed to make him jam with glycerine; if I hadn't done it myself, I'd never have believed that it wasn't made with sugar! — "We'll set up a health-food restaurant when we're ruined, and Félicie will carry on cooking as always — I'll be the *plongeur* [dish-washer]" — he didn't put on airs! — "and YOU will be the cashier!" And he said to her, "My darling, my treasure...or rather my banker..."

- B.L. He used to play on words, even in French?
- F.G. One day a beggar went by. There were still beggars in those days; there aren't so many these days with social security and all that... they were in the middle of eating in the loggia. Then they asked me to make him something, and Mr Wells gave him one of his cigars. She flew off the handle! In those days, the cigars he smoked at every meal costed 40 francs. She said to him: "If you'd given him the money, he could have bought himself some tobacco! "If it gives me pleasure to smoke it, and if it gives me pleasure for this man to smoke a cigar like me...that's my own business! I want him to smoke a cigar like me!"

- B.L. Did the children come several times?
- F.G. The first time they came was when the house was being built. They came to see the stonework, and my husband and I were there...

Remember that they bought Lou Pidou in two stages. Afterwards, they bought a little plot down below where they put up a house for guests; and Charlie Chaplin came there. He liked him a lot — they were good friends. He stayed a week at Lou Pidou.

- B.L. Do you remember Wells clearly? You started describing him to me the other day...
- F.G. Oh, he was a fine-looking man. He was a man who looked after himself, who took plenty of exercise. He had set up a tennis-court. He took lots of exercise; he walked... sometimes he walked from 11 to 12 o'clock, just like that...or rather he went out walking more when he couldn't get on with his work. When he went out in the middle of working, it was because something wasn't going right...afterwards, he went back to it...that's what writers must be like! Because it seems that at the beginning he spent days and days without writing a word, without moving!

- B.L. Not here; earlier...
- F.G. When he was young. It was she who told me that, but it must have been true. It was when we were talking about someone who was a lazybones, and she said to me: "To think that Mr Wells has worked so hard...!"

And when he went out...suddenly he would decide that he was going to have lunch in Grasse, or going out for a walk — well, it was probably at moments when he couldn't bring himself to write, I suppose?

- B.L. He had run out of inspiration, no doubt.

F.G. Probably, that must happen, when they are writing all the time. And then later it must come back again, just like before...then he would start again...he worked...he started to work at 9 o'clock, until 11, 11.15, 11.30; then he would have a bath, and he ate at half past 12.

B.L. Do you have the impression that he changed between the time when you first saw him and...

F.G. No. I think he was always a fine-looking man. He didn't change at all during the years he spent here. He was really fit and happy down here. He was never ill. He kept himself in good shape. He was on a diet and stuck to it. And then, he was well looked after by his doctor, you know!

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B.L. And what sort of mood was he usually in? Was he gay, or sad?

F.G. He was above all very polite — for an Englishman, you know! I've seen the English at table, and still more the Americans...the Americans don't have very good manners! I've seen them with Mr Wells, eating and smoking...then Mme Keun said to me, "Don't bother about making your best dishes for them. People who smoke while they're eating can't taste what they're eating anyway!"

But as for him, he was really correct, and polite. And then you wouldn't have known that he was English. Because he didn't have the physique of an Englishman.

B.L. Yes — and maybe not the temperament, either.

F.G. And he loved France. You see, when they bought the property that we sold them, and we went to sign the contract...you know sometimes people try to cheat a little over the price — he said, "I am not in France in order to exploit the French. What I must pay I must pay. That's what happens in England. There's no cheating there!"

B.L. And do you remember any events or anything which made him particularly happy, or unhappy?

F.G. Oh yes!... When he arrived from London, above all the first few times, everybody was there to welcome him, and he was so pleased...well, you couldn't help being nice to him. Sometimes you think "oh dear, the visitors are here already!"... But we were always glad to see *him*. There was nobody like him, to my mind. He was so kind! During his Spanish trip, every evening, he said, "Maurice, you must have a good time here. You're going to see this, and this..." And with me when we went to Paris! When that film from Marseilles came out, with Raimu — *Marius* — I went to see it at the little Casino de Paris where it was on for a whole month...but that was on the stage, not a film.

B.L. He had seen it himself?

F.G. Yes, they had been to see it...

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B.L. And do you remember anything that he particularly liked?

F.G. He liked...he really liked English cooking, and French cooking, and he knew what was good; but he said, "When I am in a country, I eat the country [*mange le pays*]", meaning "I eat the local food." And she said to him, "You have a good appetite, anyway!"

B.L. And did he like animals, for example?

F.G. The cat. But he said that when one has children, one should never have animals; they were the worst microbe-carriers in existence!

B.L. He had a cat. I think he speaks of it in one of his books...he is sorry to leave it...

F.G. Oh yes, he liked cats...but the cat was dead when they split up. Bapsy was dead. No! he wasn't dead...I had to keep him... That cat! In the morning the cat had to go up and miaow outside his door. Sometimes, I didn't let him go up because it would have woken him. When I heard Mr Wells moving around, I opened the door and the cat went up. And if the cat wasn't there, well, he thought it was my fault...I said "But monsieur..." I couldn't tell him; I didn't say anything...and we even went looking for him sometimes, so that he should be outside the door...because cats are like that, you understand? Mr Wells was annoyed if he wasn't there! Then, when the cat had gone up, I took up a tray; he ate on the desk where he worked. There was his bowl, with his breakfast, and the cat never dirtied anything; he was play-acting in front of him. He was really funny with his cat!

Notes

1. The Coronation of George VI took place in May 1937. G.P. Wells had married Marjorie Craig ten years earlier.
2. October-November 1931.