

I stepped over him gingerly and pushed on up the hill. I made my way by the police-station and the College Arms towards my own house."

Now you can see why he changed the name of the Princess of Wales public house! William Brown would not have been pleased.

The Police Station was actually in Woking, where it is today (September 1989, not in the former Boys Grammar School as it will be shortly), but at least one constable was stationed in Maybury and presumably Wells was referring to his house in College Road.

"So far as I could see by the flashes, the houses about me were mostly uninjured. By the College Arms a dark heap lay in the road.

Down the road towards Maybury Bridge there were voices and the sound of feet, but I had not the courage to shout or go to them. I let myself in with my latch-key.

The towers of the Oriental college and the pine trees about it had gone. There was a light down below the hill, on the railway, near the arch, and several of the houses along Maybury Road and the streets near the station were glowing ruins."

His real house along Maybury Road, and those of his neighbours, may well have been the glowing ruins.

A while later he heard a noise down below in his garden. It was an artilleryman who had escaped the destruction. Wells let him in, gave him food and drink, and listened to his story.

At dawn, Wells and the artilleryman decided to leave the house, Wells to go to Leatherhead, the artilleryman towards London.

"We crept out of the house and ran as quickly as we could down the ill-made road by which I had come overnight. The houses seemed deserted. At the corner turning up towards the post-office a little cart, filled with boxes and furniture, and horseless, heeled over on a broken wheel. Except the lodge of the Orphanage, which was still on fire, none of the houses had suffered very greatly here."

The Orphanage Lodge would be the lodge to the Home, whilst the Post-Office was on the corner with Lavender Road and Sandy Lane. It was run by Harry Mitchell in Wells's time.

They went through the woods by the railway line.

"In one place the woodman had been at work on Saturday; trees, felled and freshly trimmed, lay in a clearing, with heaps of sawdust, by the sawing machine and its engine. Hard by was a temporary hut, deserted."

These woods, where the West Byfleet Golf Club is now, would have been mature pine-woods even in the 1890s. The trees of Sheerwater (across the railway) had been planted in the early 1800s to help drain the Sheerwater Lake (where the L.C.C. Estate is), and

photographs of Blackdown, Pyrford, show tall pine trees in the early part of this century.

The road must have been Camphill Road going out towards New Haw, as 'Byfleet Station' was in fact West Byfleet Station (opened as Byfleet & Woodham in 1887). Byfleet & New Haw station was not built until 1927.

Wells leaves the Woking area and moves on to Weybridge and Shepperton. Woking is mentioned only a few times after that, until the end when he returns to find his wife at Maybury.

The Martians were destroyed and everything returned to normal. Woking was presumably rebuilt but not, I suspect, in quite the same way as it was really rebuilt during the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

The genius of Wells is shown in his prediction of chemical warfare and laser beams long before they happened. But he also predicted the total destruction of Woking, for the Woking he knew has been destroyed, not by Martians, but by the town planners.

One cannot help wondering what he would have made of the town of the 1990s, and what, or who, he would have had the Martians destroy now, if they were to return for the War of the Worlds II.

[This article is an abridgement of one which appeared, with illustrations, in Vol.2 of the *Woking History Journal* (Spring 1990). Photocopies of the original article are available at a cost of £1.50 each, excluding postage; from 166 High Street, Old Woking, Surrey GU22 9JH, England. The author also conducts guided tours of the places mentioned in *The War of the Worlds*, and gives illustrated lectures on them, using photographs from the 1890s. Enquiries should be sent c/o the above address.]

A. Langley Searles Concerning 'The Country of the Blind'

Although H.G. Wells' short fantasy 'The Country of the Blind' has been reprinted frequently since its original appearance early in the century, few readers are apparently aware of the fact that there are

two different versions of the story extant. It is almost universally remembered in its first form, which saw print originally in the April 1904 number of the *English Strand Magazine*, and which has since been included in *The Door in the Wall, and Other Stories* (1911), *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* (1911) and *The Short Stories of H.G. Wells* (1927).

In this version, one Nunez - an expert mountain-climber and guide - enters an isolated Andean valley which has been completely cut off from outer civilization for fifteen generations. The ancestors of the present inhabitants had suffered from a rare malady that caused them gradually to lose their sight - a loss of faculty which proved to be hereditary, for their children were also born blind. Yet so gradual was this process that over a period of decades the people managed to evolve an existence that was not dependent on seeing for its continuance. And as generations were born, lived, and died the other four senses managed to sustain the civilization of the group. The old concepts of reality were changed; traditions were weighed, and molded to fit seemingly more rational concepts; the very universe, to these blind people, shrank to the area of their tiny valley, a hollow between all but unscalable rocky cliffs. And at the time Nunez arrives, the very names for all things connected with sight have faded from the language.

Nunez remembers that "in the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king," but soon discovers that this aphorism is not valid. With their highly-developed sense of hearing and keen dog-like sense of smell the inhabitants have him always at their mercy; and since they regard his talk of "seeing" as a symptom of insanity he is kept under strict surveillance. In the end, not wishing to continue at hard manual labor for subsistence to the end of his days, Nunez abandons the Country of the Blind and Medina-saroté, a girl there who has come to love him, and manages to climb out of the valley by the same dangerously precipitous way he entered it.

In 1939 Wells revised the story extensively. This revised version was published in a limited edition by the well-known Golden Cockerel Press of London. Only 280 numbered copies were printed, which makes the volume virtually unobtainable as far as the average collector is concerned. This is indeed unfortunate, for along with the new version is also included the original one, and both are embellished with numerous engravings by Clifford Web. Luckily, however, the tale has been reprinted in its 1939 form in two other

volumes: *The College Survey of English Literature* (1942), edited by B.J. Whiting and others, and *Masterpieces of Science Fiction* (1967), edited by Sam Moskowitz.

The author has added about 3000 words in the revised version, thus increasing the story's original length by approximately one-third. The difference lies solely in the ending. Here, instead of abandoning Medina-saroté and her people, Nunez at this point in the narration suddenly notices that a great section of the precipices surrounding the valley has developed a serious fault-line since his arrival. This can mean only one thing: the ultimate collapse of a portion of the rock into the Country of the Blind, which would of course cause its complete destruction. All attempts to warn the people prove useless; they regard his excitement over this imminent danger as a final proof of incurable insanity, and in the end, their patience exhausted, drive him from the village. Soon the overhanging rocks do indeed slide down into the valley, and in the final moments Nunez and Medina-saroté win through to freedom by climbing out the newly-created rift.

After several days of wandering the two are found by native hunters in a condition of near-starvation, and brought back to civilization. They marry, and settle in Quito with Nunez' people, Nunez himself becoming a prosperous tradesman. The couple have four children, all of whom are able to see. Though happy with her husband and loved by her children, Medina-saroté after many years still thinks of her former peaceful life with regret, silently mourning its irrevocable loss. Steadfastly she refuses to consult oculists who might remedy her blindness. A conversation with the narrator's wife reveals her attitude:

"I have no use for your colours or your stars," said Medina-saroté...

"But after all that has happened! Don't you want to see Nunez; see what he is like?"

"But I know what he is like and seeing him might put us apart. He would not be so near to me. The loveliness of *your* world is a complicated and fearful loveliness and mine is simple and near. I had rather Nunez saw for me - because he knows nothing of fear."

"But the *beauty!*" cried my wife.

"It may be beautiful," said Medina-saroté, "but it must be very terrible to *see.*"

In his introduction to the Gold Cockerel Press edition of *The Country of the Blind* Wells gives his reasons for rewriting the original story in this new form:

The essential idea...remains the same throughout, but the value

attached to vision changes profoundly. It has been changed because there has been a change in the atmosphere of life about us. In 1904 the stress is upon the spiritual isolation of those who see more keenly than their fellows and the tragedy of their incommunicable appreciation of life. The visionary dies, a worthless outcast, finding no other escape from his gift but death, and the blind world goes on, invincibly self-satisfied and secure. But in the later story vision becomes something altogether more tragic; it is no longer a story of disregarded loveliness and release; the visionary sees destruction sweeping down upon the whole blind world he has come to endure and even to love; he sees it plain, and he can do nothing to save it from its fate.

Regardless of whether or not the reader agrees with Wells that changing world conditions have necessitated a change in this story's outlook, he will probably regret that such a change was actually made. Firstly, all allegorical purpose aside, that quality of insulation that made the original so memorable is completely lost. In the first version Wells draws his circle and wisely remains within it to cover the ground thoroughly and completely. But in the second, with the expansion of the locale from the small isolated valley to the larger canvas of the outside world, the author cannot - and does not - succeed in working up the area properly. The result is a certain lack of convincingness that is unmistakable. Even granting his wish to change "the value attached to vision" Wells obviously need not have violated the insulation of his setting in order to accomplish this.

Secondly - all allegorical considerations once more aside - this new ending lacks the fundamental originality the first version possesses. Such a dénouement, with its conventional satisfaction of public demand for consummation of love-interest (and a tacked-on love-interest at that), is precisely what modern hack "pulpists" would resort to. Not even the native Wellsian story-telling ability can dissipate this impression.

The style of Wells' writing, however, remains unchanged; he had lost little or nothing in the third-of-a-century interim in which 'The Country of the Blind' remained untouched. Always he remains an excellent story-teller.

And because Wells is such a good story-teller it is regrettable that in later years he attempted the metamorphosis to the preacher and philosopher. He will always be remembered for the incisive and vigorous creative power that lent life to his original imaginative ideas in such fine works as *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*, as well as the "pure" fantasy of shorter tales like 'The

Magic Shop' and 'A Dream of Armageddon'. Yet as a philosopher and a preacher Wells will probably not be remembered, because his abilities in these fields are not outstanding. We tolerate Wells the preacher because he is one with Wells the story-teller - but if some kind of schizophrenic split could effect a physical separation of the two there is no doubt which Wellsian twin we would choose.

In 'The Country of the Blind' this combination is both good and bad: good, since the story may be read and enjoyed and judged as excellent without thought or reference to the allegory which underlies it; and bad, since because of this very fact the allegory is obviously both extraneous and unnecessary. And, it may be added, ineffective: for if a reader cannot perceive easily at first reading what Wells is allegorically driving at, the author might as well have abandoned this ulterior motif to begin with.

One further comment on the 1939 version of 'The Country of the Blind' may be appended. In the introduction quoted on the previous page Wells mentions "the tragedy of their incommunicable appreciation of life" concerning those who "see more keenly than their fellows." Yet we note in the second version that the girl Medina-saroté, who has been taken from the valley, later on realizes the existence of something beyond her senses and her conception of the world. She has learned to speak of "seeing," and uses the words of sight in a manner that shows she has some vague, empirical idea of their meaning. Yet she shrinks fearfully from the opportunity to realize their full significance that surgery offers.

This is important, for it furnishes a deeper insight into Wells' philosophy. He always regarded Stupidity as the monarch of the world, and always, too, held forth that transformation of the earth into a near-utopia could be accomplished if the scientist-intellectual type were in control - in fact his confidence in this cure-all by dint of a generation's repetition became so cocksure that it is almost wearisome. And now the reader is indirectly made cognizant of what Wells considers to be the chief reason why his scheme has not as yet been tried: the people themselves fear it. Because of their stupidity they not only do not at present understand it, but they are afraid to allow themselves to be led by those who do. And thus the tragedy that visits upon *The Country of the Blind* is nothing less than a measure of punishment, an allegorical lashing which Wells feels the world of reality richly deserves.

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