# AFTER *ANN VERONICA*: THE ENIGMA OF 'LITTLE E': FACT OR FICTION?

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Wells presented his love affair with the author known as Elizabeth von Arnim as 'The Episode of Little e'.[1] It was a good title, and it made a good story. His account was written in the 1930s and formed one of a series of essays written as a postscript to his *Experiment in Autobiography*.[2] These revelations about his relationships with women and his sexual nature were deemed too sensitive for publication in his lifetime. Edited by his son, G. P. Wells, they eventually appeared under his title of *H. G. Wells in Love* (1984). By this time, the women concerned were no longer in a position tell their own versions, which may have been very different. 'The Episode of Little e' reveals more about Wells, his character and his creative impulse than about Elizabeth herself, or even his relationship with her.[3] Diminutive though she may have been in stature, Elizabeth could never be considered as 'little' in personality or intellectual ability. By referring to her diaries, letters and known biographical details another picture begins to emerge, one which sheds light on Wells's writing and his personality.

Elizabeth met Wells in 1907 at the Lyceum Club in London, a couple of years before the publication of *Ann Veronica*.[4] At the time of their first meeting, Elizabeth's looks belied her age. She and Wells were exact contemporaries, both forty-one years old. She was petite, cultured and intelligent, and despite being the mother of five children, was still youthful in appearance, attractive and vivacious. Given her status as a famous best-selling author with seven published titles to her name at the time of their meeting, Wells decided to write to invite her to visit him and his family at Spade House, Sandgate.[5]

In her reply to his letter, dated 8 July 1907, and referring to their first meeting, Elizabeth writes: 'I have often thought of the ten minutes talk with you with such unclouded satisfaction. […] You were perfectly delightful.'[6] In this letter she mentions having given one of his books*, The Future in America* (1906), to her husband to read, and passing a copy of another, *A Modern Utopia* (1905), to a

[1] H. G. Wells, *H. G. Wells in Love: Postscript to an Experiment in Autobiography*, ed. G. P. Wells (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), ' The Episode of Little e', 87-94.
[2] H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (since 1886)*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1934).
[3] An unpublished paper by Dr Sylvia Hardy, 'The Language of Others: The Work of Elizabeth von Arnim' given at the conference, 'Other as Self: Women's Writing in the Modernist Period', Nene College, Northampton, 2 November 1991 has been most helpful here.
[4] H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (Fisher Unwin, 1909).
[5] Elizabeth's total output was twenty-one published novels and a play.
[6] Letter to Wells, H. G. Wells papers, Rare Book and Special Collections Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

neighbour. She responds with enthusiasm to his invitation to visit Spade House, which she proposes for the August of that year, when she is planning a tour of Kent with some friends and family. She concludes with a reciprocal invitation if ever he were 'up this way'.

She signs the letter: 'Mary Arnim,' for this, rather than 'Elizabeth,' was her true name. The letter was sent from her home in Pomerania, Prussia, where was she living on her husband's estate at Nassenheide. She could be fairly certain that Wells would never be passing 'up this way,' or be in a position to accept her reciprocal invitation. She was always ready to tease.

**Mary Becomes Elizabeth**

**Figure 1: 'Elizabeth', or Mary, the Gräfin von Arnim, in 1905. She is in her thirties.**

Mary's books were all published as being written 'by the author of *Elizabeth and her German Garden*,' which was the title of her first best-selling novel, published in 1898. Thus she was gradually becoming known by the name

'Elizabeth'.[7] The mystery of the author's actual identity was a closely guarded secret, for Mary was married to the Count von Arnim-Schlagenthin who was a member of the Prussian *Junker* class and needed to avoid any publicity associated with his wife's writing.[8] Mary's creative reasons for assuming a different identity when writing her books coincided well with her husband's wishes.

Born in Australia, Mary Annette Beauchamp, had travelled to England in 1869 with her parents, four older brothers and older sister, when she was just three years old. Clever and well-educated, she was prevented by illness from taking the University of Cambridge entrance examination. Instead, she became an Exhibition student of the organ, piano and viola at the Royal College of Music. By her early twenties, in a way reminiscent of the heroine of Ann Veronica, she had decided upon an independent existence, refusing to contemplate all offers of marriage. Two of her older brothers were embarking on what would become very distinguished careers in music and medicine; she knew she had the ability to do the same. Hadria Fullerton in Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) is a key example of the talented yet frustrated female musician and artist who features heavily in New Woman fiction. Marriage was indeed subject to much debate at this time. Following the publication of Mona Caird's 'Marriage' in the *Westminster Review* of 1888, the *Daily Telegraph* received some 27,000 letters from the public on the pros and cons of wedded life.

At this point, however, the wishes of Mary's parents intervened. Her studies at the Royal College were interrupted when, at the age of 23, she was whisked away on a tour of Europe with her parents. While attending a musical soirée in Rome, she met the newly-widowed Prussian Count, some fifteen years her senior. A cultured and musical man, he fell in love with the entrancing young Mary whose outstanding musical ability was demonstrated when he attended a concert at which she performed Bach on the organ. They were engaged within weeks, and he later insisted on Mary playing the organ in front of the formidable Cosima Wagner when he took her, with her parents, to the festival at Bayreuth.[9] Mary and the Count were married in London in the February of 1891, much to the delight of her parents. Thus Wells's idea that she had 'eloped' with him was either a misunderstanding or a misrepresentation.

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[7] This convention is followed in the title of the biography of 'Elizabeth' written by her second daughter Elizabeth von Arnim-Schlagenthin (Liebet), under the pseudonym of Leslie de Charms: *Elizabeth of the German Garden* (London: Heinemann, 1958). The edition to which the author refers is published by Doubleday, Garden City, New York, in 1959; Karen Usborne, *'Elizabeth'* (London: Bodley Head, 1986) suggests two possible reasons for Mary's decision to write under this name (67). Note: Usborne's biography contains a number of factual errors, notably the opening sentence that Mary Beauchamp was born in New Zealand. Any references cited have been checked with original material.

[8] Usborne, 74.

[9] Usborne, 38.

Unfortunately for Mary, the next five years, spent in a flat in Berlin where she had to endure stultifying Prussian aristocratic society, did not fulfil any dreams of marital bliss. Three difficult childbirths in as many years produced three little girls, instead of the male heir desired by the Count. A lesser spirit than Mary's would have been crushed, but an expedition in the early spring of 1896 changed everything. She accompanied the Count on a visit to his vast estate at Nassenheide, situated to the north of Berlin in Pomerania, not far from Stettin (it is now in Poland).

Mary declared immediately that she would live on this neglected and romantic site. Loving the freedom of the space and delighting in nature, she was inspired to begin her writing. Informed by her extensive reading of romantic poetry, her love of literature and her own musical education, the result was a remarkable book which became an instant best-seller. Written in diary form, it was called *Elizabeth and her German Garden*.[10]

In this book, the first person narrator resembles Mary but is called 'Elizabeth'. The character of Elizabeth is demonstrably distinct from that of Mary but her circumstances resemble those of Mary very closely. Thus the new persona of Elizabeth the author is born. In her book, all three of the von Arnim daughters appeared, famously, under the fictional names of the April, May and June babies. Therefore Wells's suggestion that she wrote her book 'to while away the tedium of her first pregnancy' looks very strange.[11]

As the trials of Elizabeth unfold in her first work, the narrator's thought processes are revealed in ways which bring to mind techniques which would be employed by many writers in the early years of the next century. Conflict in the idyllic world of the German garden soon becomes apparent with the appearance of the 'Man of Wrath,' whose territory it is, but whose possession is being undermined by his wife. The conflict over territory is not merely marital; the politics of gender reverberate into the wider arena when Elizabeth is seen to be planting a naturalistic English garden in the middle of Prussia.

Themes of conflict recur repeatedly in Elizabeth's novels, overlaid by those of escape and freedom from convention. This collage of thematic material is disguised adroitly by the ironic humour and lightness of touch so that what is happening is barely perceptible. The technique would be employed for her subsequent novels; while disguising the more serious side of her work she pleased the public but misled her critics. The author's actual identity remained a mystery, hidden behind the writing persona − which brings us back to the enigma of 'The Episode of Little e'. Wells's first paragraph makes the problem of unravelling her identity even more difficult by stating that she was Irish. Furthermore, he

[10] *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (Macmillan, 1898) was published, as explained above, anonymously. The name Elizabeth von Arnim was used by Virago when reprinting her novels in the 1980s.
[11] *Wells in Love*, 87.

compounds this by saying that her older brother, Sir Sydney Beauchamp, a distinguished London physician, practised in Dublin. We are left to speculate why Wells chose to write in this way, and wondering how much of the rest of his account is to be believed. What is fact and what fiction?

In his recent biography of Wells, Michael Sherborne comments on the frequently made assumption of the resemblance of Amber Reeves to the fictional character of Ann Veronica. Arguing that the character of Ann Veronica could be taken equally from Wells's wife Jane, he writes that 'the book was about his view of women rather than an account of any one woman.'[12] The world ordered by Wells in his fiction often bore some relation to real life events and characters he had experienced, but often fiction and fact were intermingled or exchanged to suit his purposes. Referring to some of Wells's novels written during the years 1912-22, David C. Smith comments: 'They are autobiographical in many passages, but as often they reflect Wells's ideas of a possible world. In fact, it is in the areas of frustration, and often even sputtering failure that they are closest to his own reactions. For they are often written, or so it seems to me, with the secondary purpose of exorcising unpleasant aspects of his life.'[13] This exorcism seems to be operating in Wells's Chapter 'The Episode of Little e' in a similar way; even when he is writing what is ostensibly autobiography, fiction intervenes.

**Wells and Elizabeth**

Wells and Elizabeth (as she must now be called) arranged to meet up again in the summer of 1907. She was busy planning a month-long tour around the Kentish countryside by horse-drawn caravans with a party of friends (including the young E. M. Forster, a former tutor at Nassenheide) and members of her family. She contrived that the tour should bring her within striking distance of Spade House, where she could renew her acquaintance with the charming Mr. Wells, whose writing she admired, and who had appeared to be such a sympathetic character.

Hiring a motor car, Elizabeth travelled from where the caravans were camped near Bodiam Castle to Sandgate. The visit proved very successful. Elizabeth loved the beautiful house, gardens and sea views, and found that she and Jane Wells had much in common, especially as Jane shared her passion for gardens. A friendship was established with both Wells and Jane and all might have continued on this happy basis. However, over the next twelve months circumstances for both Wells and Elizabeth changed dramatically.

For Wells, the publicity which surrounded the end of his affair with Amber Reeves, and the ensuing controversy following the publication of *Ann Veronica*, had left his reputation damaged and his love-life without focus. He had to sell Spade House and move to an address on Hampstead Heath. Likewise, great

[12] Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London: Owen, 2010), 204.
[13] David C. Smith, *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 374.

changes were afoot in Elizabeth's life. After the caravan tour, she and her family were shocked to find that the Count's health had visibly deteriorated. It was revealed as well that their financial situation was desperate following many problems with the management of his estates in Prussia; the estate of Nassenheide would have to be sold.[14] In view of the increasingly bellicose relationship between Germany and England, it was concluded after much discussion that the only option would be for Elizabeth to return to live in England with the children, and pursue her literary career there.

Elizabeth was engaged in writing the novel *The Caravaners* which was based on the experience of her tour around Kent in 1907. [15] Written entirely from the point of view of a fictitious Prussian Baron, the message of this book is clearly political. The political basis of much of Elizabeth's work has been explored by Alison Hennegan in her essay 'In A Class of Her Own: Elizabeth von Arnim'. She writes: 'Several major issues preoccupied Elizabeth for much of her life and recur constantly in her work […] chief amongst these issues are: male tyranny over women, practised domestically, sanctioned socially and culturally.'[16] Wells's statement that she was 'incapable of political ideas' probably refers to his own interpretation of what these ideas might be.[17] Elizabeth's *The Caravaners* illustrates that she was using her novels as a means to express her political awareness, using the example of male tyranny over women to illustrate wider implications. If Ann Veronica is an amalgam of women based on one or two known intimately to Wells, then the character Jellaby in *The Caravaners* is an amalgam of sympathetic men known to Elizabeth, but probably based mainly on Wells. The Baron, a Major in the Prussian army, is the most unsympathetic narrator imaginable; he disapproves vehemently of all Socialists, and Jellaby in particular. He remarks disparagingly upon:

> "Jellaby's appearance and manner of speech […] his flannel collar, his untidy clothes, the wisp of hair for ever being brushed aside from his forehead only for ever to fall across it again, his slender, almost feminine frame, his round face, and the ridiculous whiteness of his skin."[18]

The Baron condemns Socialism as '"the rabbit of Socialism, with its two eldest children Division of Property and Free Love"' and declares that 'Jellabies' and their like would not be tolerated in Germany. The novel ends when socialism and feminism, embodied in Jellaby, score a powerful victory over the pompous might of Prussia, embodied in the Baron. The Baron is mortified to learn that Jellaby has

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[14] de Charms, 129.
[15] Elizabeth von Arnim, *The Caravaners* (London, Smith & Elder, 1909).
[16] Alison Hennegan, 'In A Class of Her Own: Elizabeth von Arnim', in *Women Writers of the 1930s*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
[17] *H. G. Wells in Love*, 87.
[18] Elizabeth von Arnim, *The Caravaners* (London: Virago, 2002), 241.

married the delicious Frau von Eckthum, the very lady whom the Baron has been lasciviously pursuing throughout the novel.[19]

Both *Ann Veronica* and Elizabeth's *The Caravaners* were published in 1909; each contained feminist and socialist themes, and made commentaries on the state of marriage. Elizabeth's writing did not aim to reform the world, but the social issues of the day were reflected in the actions of her characters. Politics on a wider front were reflected too as the Prussian Baron strode across the Kentish countryside, licking his lips not only at the sight of Frau von Eckthum, but also at the fertile green fields of a vulnerable England; a warning was being given, but it went by unheeded.

The success of *The Caravaners* brought welcome funds to the von Arnims which would help pay for the medical care needed by the Count, who was now terminally ill in a sanatorium in Germany. Wells's mistaken statement that Elizabeth had 'left him' is an unnecessarily cruel dart.[20] Elizabeth repeatedly visited the Count in Germany, and was with him when he died in August 1910. There is, however, little doubt of the truth of Wells's statement, that her dread of any more pregnancies led her to refuse to sleep with her husband after the birth of her son.

**The Chalet in Switzerland**

Elizabeth had to remain in Germany for a while to see to the sale of the estate at Schlagenthin, but had managed to obtain a copy of Wells's *The New Machiavelli*.[21] On 5 November, from the Hotel Chateau Bellevue in Sierre, Switzerland, she wrote to Wells of her 'supreme joy over your wonderful Machiavelli'.[22] In her emotional state following the death of the Count, she responds very deeply to what Wells has to say about marriage in this novel. Her letter is full of heart-ache and a longing for understanding: 'never did a man understand things as you do […] you know – and the poetry of it, and the aching, desolating truth!'

However, with her insight into the reality of human emotions, she sees a problem with the ending of his novel:

> What one longs to read, written by you, is the study of the afterwards – what happened to them as the dreadful ordinary years passed with all their days full of getting up, and walking, and having meals, going to bed, and no friends anywhere, and just their two selves. Is anyone strong enough in love and fine thinking to stand the effect of all the little hours?

[19] It may be no coincidence that Frau von Eckthum's Christian name is 'Betti'.
[20] *H. G. Wells in Love*, 87.
[21] H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli*, (London, John Lane, 1911). Mary must have obtained a copy in advance of publication.
[22] Wells papers at UIUC, 04.001.

This letter is written from a hotel in Sierre, in the Canton of Valais in Switzerland, where she was trying to recover from the traumatic few months in Berlin. Contrary to the account given in Karen Usborne's biography, and repeated in the recent biofiction of Wells by David Lodge, *A Man of Parts*, reference to Elizabeth's letters and diaries shows that this expedition was not taken with Wells. Coming directly from sorting out her husband's affairs in Berlin, she was in the company of her German companion and lifelong friend from Nassenheide, Fräulein Backe, known as Teppi.[23] She was also looking for a place to build a suitable home in neutral territory for herself and her family, away from the pre-War tensions of England and Germany. She was, however, in correspondence with Wells and wrote to him from the Hotel Victoria at Glion, above Montreux:

> Dear Mr. H. G.
>
> I've escaped from Berlin. I am on my way to Sierre, and feel born again. Your letter was sent on to me here […] I'm going to Sierre to begin to build my chalet up on the hills above it and shall spend a placid summer in an old quaint hotel there […] Yours sincerely Elizabeth Arnim.[24]

She concludes this letter with an invitation to Wells and all his family to visit her at the chalet, once building is completed.

Always energetic, Elizabeth loved mountain walking and on one of these expeditions she and Teppi climbed high into the mountains above Sierre to a location just below the resort of Montana Vermala.[25] There, on a huge rocky promontory, she discovered the ideal site for a chalet. The view across the Rhone valley was, and still is, spectacular, encompassing the vast panoramic spread of the Swiss and French Alps beyond.

The decision made, Elizabeth returned to London, and one of the first things she did was to arrange to see Wells, saying 'it will give me great pleasure to try and make you vain.'[26] She was pandering to a trait in Wells, knowing this would not be difficult. As was his habit, Wells himself gives an account of the meeting in a letter to his wife Jane. He writes:

> She talks very well, she knows *The New Machiavelli* by heart, and I think she's a nice little friend to have. Great projects of chalet in the Jura for summer and winter use and us all to go. Her conversation is free but her morals are strict. (Sad experience has taught her that if she so much as <u>thinks</u> of anything she has a baby....)[27]

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[23] Usborne, 158, David Lodge, *A Man of Parts*, (London: Harvill Secker, 2011), 392, De Charms, 142.
[24] Wells papers at UIUC, 13.002.
[25] This mountain resort is now known as Crans Montana, in the Valais canton of Switzerland.
[26] Wells papers at UIUC, 03.001.
[27] Wells papers at UIUC, 015.001.

The implication is that he and Elizabeth have had some fairly intimate discussions. The interesting statement regarding Elizabeth's 'strict morals' and

disinclination for any physical relationship shows that Elizabeth was not, at this stage anyway, looking for an affair. Wells slips up in his geography: the site of the chalet, which he was to come so know so well, was to be built (as stated above) in the Valais Canton of Switzerland, not the Jura.[28]

Elizabeth and Wells were soon seeing each other on a fairly regular basis. Leslie de Charms's biography and Wells's account tell us that they shared a keen sense of fun and enjoyed talking on current issues of feminism, marriage, love and writing. However, De Charms writes: 'to Wells, Elizabeth's emotional detachment, the impression she managed to convey that this meeting of their minds was an adventure that could not be improved upon, soon became hollow and wearisome assumptions. It appears that he half persuaded her to go to Ireland with him, but that cautiously, at the last moment, she refused him. She refused him a great deal besides. Unused to such treatment, he found it incredible, for did she not always seem delighted to see him?'[29]

This account of the relationship differs greatly from that given by Karen Usborne in her biography of Elizabeth, in which she concludes that an affair began soon after the first meeting between Elizabeth and Wells. Her biography refers to Wells's chapter, accepting his version of events (including the bedroom arrangements in the chalet).[30] Her biography and other accounts based upon it therefore derive their material from Wells.

## Adventuring With Different Objectives[31]

Her diary entries show that Elizabeth's attention was being diverted in the August of 1912, not only by the demands of her children but also by numerous time-consuming shopping expeditions for furniture for the enormous sixteen-bedroomed chalet. Wells began to feel neglected.

It was just at this moment, when Wells felt in want of consolation, that the 21 year old, Cicely Fairfield, writing under the name of Rebecca West, strode into his life. Spurred to interest by a critical article she had written on his latest novel, *Marriage* (1912), Wells invited her to lunch at Easton Glebe. Wells was smitten.

From this time, Elizabeth's diary entries take on a more sombre tone. When, at the beginning of November 1912, she was to set off to spend time up at her chalet, she records a twilight walk in Kensington Gardens with Wells: 'Had tea outside in

[28] Usborne, 158, seems to have used Wells's account, mistakenly assuming the chalet was in the Jura.
[29] De Charms, 147, 145.
[30] Usborne, 158.
[31] De Charms, 148.

wonderful grey and mauve and quiet and gloom, then sat by Serpentine watching lights – he took me home – talk and farewell.'[32] When she suggested he should join her at the chalet, 'he did not want to enough. Saw, in this way, the last of G.' She completed the break by writing to him from Switzerland, 'bowing myself out,' as she puts it. However, Wells was not to be rejected so easily. He became hysterical, writing a stream of dreadful letters, slandering Jane ('she's as dead as a herring'), and imploring her to reconsider, calling her a 'spirit of the inmost,' and saying 'you are the eyes of the whole universe to me.'[33]

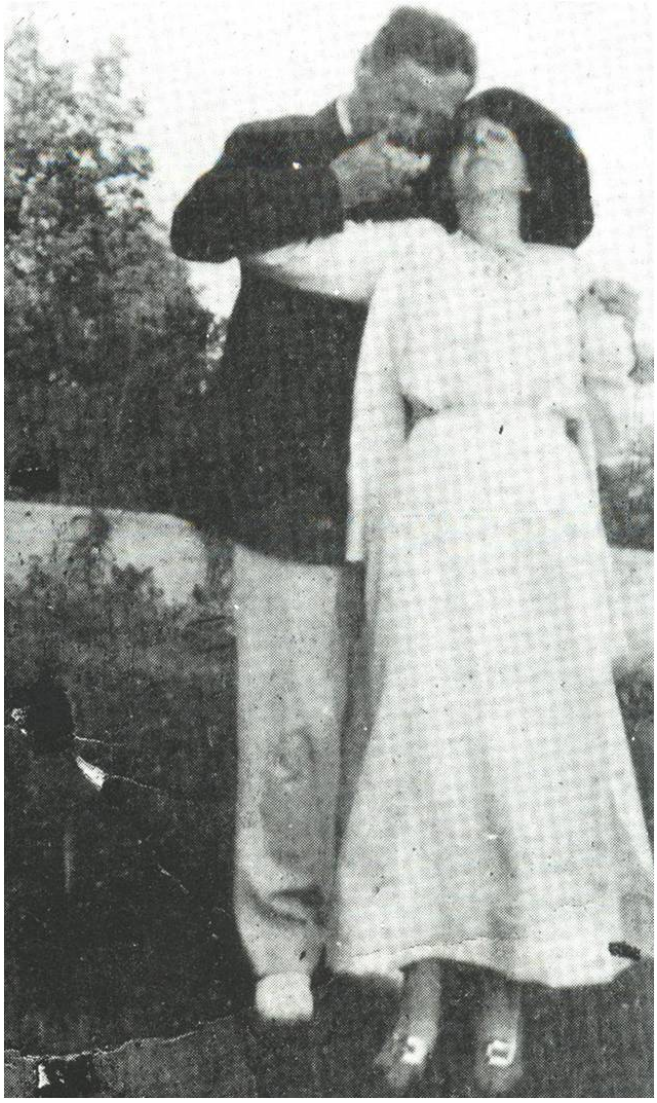

**Figure 2: Wells and Mary together near the chalet (probably 1913)**

He followed these letters with a telegram, and then by appearing in person at the chalet: '27 November. Telegram from G. and half an hour after, himself. Horrid talks.'[34] The reason, for these 'horrid talks' and the ensuing 'great row' on 30 November could be Elizabeth's refusal to enter into, or continue with, a sexual relationship with Wells. The more he insisted, the more she rejected him, and the

[32] The Huntington Library, California, Elizabeth Mary Russell, Countess Russell papers, Journal Typescripts, ER 91-106.
[33] Usborne, 167.
[34] Huntington Library, California, Countess Russell papers.

worse matters became. Being snowbound inside the chalet for the next few days did nothing to help the situation.

On 2 December Elizabeth records: 'a devil in G of cruelty and horridness. Then he left at 7pm.' He staggered out down the mountainside in the cold and dark, presumably taking the funicular railway some half a mile away down to the nearest hotel. Elizabeth was left, 'feeling like a convalescent' and filled with a great sense of peace.[35]

A contrite Wells re-appeared at the beginning of February 1913 and things were temporarily patched up. So the relationship staggered on, with a series of quarrels and reconciliations. The romantic idyll depicted in the Swiss mountain scene in *Ann Veronica* could not have been further from the tempestuous reality that Wells was experiencing with Elizabeth up at her chalet.

**Figure 3: Mary's chalet from the west side, with the Little Chalet where she did her writing, in the foreground.**

In reality, Elizabeth could not accept the ignominy of being shared with Rebecca, and Wells failed to understand the difficulty. None of this is mentioned in Wells's 1930s account, which simply stresses his desire to keep the relationship on a casual basis: 'More and more did she resent the fact that I kept our love light-hearted,' he writes, and he follows this by speaking of Elizabeth's jealousy of Jane.[36] Jealousy had undoubtedly surfaced, but the cause was most unlikely to have been the compliant Jane, whom Elizabeth had always liked. Indeed, she had actually stayed with the Wells family at Easton in July 1912, and in later years met Jane for lunches and games of chess.

At this point, Wells returned briefly to London, but after a couple of weeks he was again at the chalet. A disastrous trip to Italy followed, and they returned disconsolate, to London. By May, however, they were both back in the chalet and after taking one of their favourite walks, along the mountain track to the hamlet of Lens, restoring peace; 'things all honey again,' she records.[37] Thus the summer passed, with Wells writing *The World Set Free* and annoying Elizabeth by reading out some of its more depressing passages to her.

[35] Elizabeth von Arnim, *All The Dogs of My Life* (1936) (London : Virago, 2003), 95.
[36] *H. G. Wells in Love*, 90.
[37] Countess Russell Papers, Diary entry, 16 May 1913.

**Figure 4: The Little Chalet taken from the lower path in 2005 (author's photo)**

The autumn saw increasing tension. On Elizabeth's return to her chalet in September, six letters from Wells, now back in London, were waiting for her, all saying things were over between them. By now, he was heavily involved with Rebecca. Nevertheless, towards the end of October, while Elizabeth was peacefully working away at her novel once more, who should come slithering up the icy path to the chalet, but Wells.[38] In a bad mood, he was 'very offensive and made me cry,' she wrote.[39] Nothing could save them now. On 5 November, the end is recorded:

Lovely mild sunny day. G's departure out of my life. Thank god – Restored to Freedom – He unkind and rude all day, then suddenly dear and wonderful at end. His last remark as he left the chalet and I bade him farewell in the porch was, crying,

'It's all because I'm so common.' Poor Gh.[40] So it was R.I.P.[41]

This statement sums up his bitter attitude to their misunderstanding. David Lodge assumes that Wells felt nothing but relief: 'The further he left the chalet behind him, the more his spirits rose...', but Elizabeth's exclamation that she was 'Restored to Freedom' shows that she, rather than he, felt the greater sense of

[38] Elizabeth von Arnim, *The Pastor's Wife* (London: Smith, Elder, 1914).
[39] Countess Russell papers, Diary entry 21 October 1913.
[40] In her diaries, Wells is often referred to as 'Gh'.
[41] Countess Russell Papers.

release from an increasingly onerous relationship. Nevertheless, she wept for days after his departure.[42]

The postscript came when Wells saw her at her flat in St James's Court. He writes: 'It was your fault,' she said. 'You were only half a lover'. 'It was your fault,' he retorted, 'You didn't really love.'[43]

**The Aftermath**

Wells could not bear rejection and assumed that 'love' meant forgiving him anything. His bitterness was compounded by the next turn of events. It was not long after his departure from the chalet when, in early 1914, Elizabeth's old friend Lord Francis Russell appeared there. Having rejected Wells because, in his view, he was "common", the next thing she did was to accept the advances of a peer of the realm. Wells's lasting sense of resentment echoes down the years as he accuses her of marrying Russell for his title and to gain English nationality. In reality, Elizabeth became naturalised as British on her return to London from Switzerland in September 1914, just after the outbreak of the First World War. The day after she finally arrived back in London, having escaped from the chalet and travelled back through France under an assumed name, she records:

> September 3. All day busy. Foreign office, lawyers etc. about naturalisation.
>
> September 5. Saw H. G. and thought him dreadful.[44]

She was 'passed for naturalisation' on 20 September 1914. Elizabeth and Russell were married in February 1916, but the marriage was a miserable disaster and she left him after a couple of years. They were never divorced so she remained the Countess Russell to the end of her days.

Echoes of his relationship with Elizabeth appear in several of Wells's novels, especially those written during the years of their relationship. These include *The Passionate Friends*, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914) and *Mr. Britling Sees it Through* (1916).[45] These are accompanied by lengthy discussions on inter-class relationships, female frustration and marriage. The female heroines often bear some physical resemblance to Elizabeth; this is particularly so in the case of Lady Mary Justin (*The Passionate Friends*).[46] Likewise, versions of Wells, thinly

[42] Lodge, 432.
[43] Usborne, 169.
[44] Countess Russell Papers, 1914.
[45] H. G. Wells, *The Passionate Friends* (London: Macmillan, 1913). The subject of this novel is jealousy, and the dedication, 'To L.E.N.S.' refers probably to the favourite walk taken by Wells and Mary, from the chalet to the village of Lens. Perhaps it is one of Wells's jokes.
[46] The name, Mary Justin, has a marked similarity to Mary Arnim.

disguised, appear in many of the novels of Elizabeth.[47] Each used versions of the other as starting points for fictional creations.

The tone of 'The Episode of Little e' changes when Wells admits that, as time went on, he and Elizabeth enjoyed a long friendship. They lived not far from each other near Mougins in France during the early 1930s. We see from Elizabeth's affectionate letters to Wells that he sent all his latest works to her, and she sent him hers in return. Frequently she praises Wells for what he is doing to raise awareness of the threat of Fascism that is falling across Europe. Now in their sixties, they adopt pet names for each other, she addressing him as 'Geak,' and signing her letters 'Little e'.[48] This epithet appears to have been used for the first time by her to him in these letters. Elizabeth's last letter to Wells was written from her hotel in South Carolina in 1940, where she had fled from her home in the South of France after the outbreak of the Second World War. She died a few months later.

Wells and Elizabeth had loved briefly and forged a lasting friendship. They found creative inspiration from their relationship which could be woven into their fiction. Looking at Elizabeth's records, it is clear that it was not the gay, carefree sexual relationship that Wells would have us believe.

The final word should given to Elizabeth, writing in her diary of 1927:

> January 12. Read *Britling*, which I had only hastily looked at when it came out. Much interested.[49] That's how we all felt during the war. Good to have got it, forever pinned down by a genius. He <u>is</u> a genius – with two enormous feet of clay. Also clay in other parts of him – the clay of smallness, malice, spite etc – ever wanting in distinction.[50]

She lies at rest beside her beloved brother Sydney in a small churchyard in Buckinghamshire. Enigmatic to the last, the epitaph reads: *Mary Annette, Countess Russell 'Elizabeth' Parva sed Apta*.[51]

Little but effective indeed.

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[47] Smith, 373, includes a passage on Elizabeth's *The Pastor's Wife*, in which he assumes that Wells is the basis for the character Ingram. Ingram is a 'type', a seductive charmer (significantly, unsuccessful in this novel), with the potential to destroy women's lives.

[48] Most of Wells's correspondence with Elizabeth has been destroyed; only fragments remain.

[49] H. G. Wells, *Mr. Britling Sees it Through* (London: Cassell, 1916).

[50] Huntington Library, 'Countess Russell Papers', Journal Typescripts. Call Number 113.

[51] Elizabeth's motto from childhood which can be translated as 'Small but fit for purpose', or perhaps 'Little but effective'.