

H.G.Wells in Love

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This is a Postscript to the two volume autobiography ¹ Wells wrote, ostensibly as an experiment, in his late sixties. Freud famously explained that the secret of a happy life was 'Lieben und arbeiten'. While the two volumes of experimentation concentrated on his work, the Postscript is, as the title indicates, devoted to his recreation, occasionally even including procreation.

Wells had no sexual experience until late in his youth. He met few women and it is symptomatic that he got attracted to and proposed to his cousin Isabel while still a virgin. In preparation for his conjugal duties he consorted briefly with a prostitute much to his satisfaction. Sexual congress with his wife was unsatisfactory deprived of any excitement. He recalls in his autobiography an incident of a younger woman visiting his home while his wife and her mother were temporarily away and with whom he had a most satisfying lay, really teaching him what sex could be, awakening his appetites. He was not in love with her and the incident never repeated itself, not because of constraint on his part, simply because the opportunity never arose again and he was not motivated enough to have it repeated with her. A white marriage so to speak, and thus it is not surprising that when he met an attractive woman as a student, his love-interest would be transferred. But the second marriage did not prove more sexually satisfactory than the first, but it gave issue and a sense of comradeship and loyalty which would last for the rest of her life. In fact Wells claims that only three women caught his love, or as he puts it, assumed the role of his Love-shadow, by which he means the romantic dream of a woman a total reunion physically and mentally, which he never would find. Two of his loves were his two wives, and the third that of a younger Russian woman, who (wisely?) refused to marry him. At least when it comes to the first two women, the claim is somewhat surprising as they come out rather pale in his reminiscences. Was he really in love, or only pretending to be in order to comply to certain social norms, or rather norms he felt he should adhere to. What he managed to do was to separate physical passion from emotional attachment, that his various affairs, some of them mere *passades* as he put it, served a purely therapeutic function, providing the kind of excitement and satisfaction he needed to get on working. In a sense more like having good meals not only once in a while but on a fairly regular basis. And he got away with it, thanks to is great success as an author, during a period in human history, when the status of a successful author was very high and not devoid of financial compensations. He was in short, rich and famous, which meant that willing women always came his way, and he had no inclination, nor any motivation, to resist a temptation, which did not even need to be irresistible. His sexual life became one of promiscuity. In David Lodge's fictional retelling², Wells comes across as a man with too much of a prick for

¹ Reviewed in the previous collection - Book Review XV

² Reviewed in XIb

his own good, and hence becoming increasingly ridiculous as he lost more and more of his power to control where his prick was leading him. Now this Postscript gives Wells the opportunity to give his version of the story, which is more interesting than the easy condemnation of outside observers, but which obviously does not necessarily mean that it justifies.

To most of us it seems incredible that a wife should accept her husband having open mistresses, but that, we are told, is only due to a limited middle-class outlook. In the upper classes the attitude is much more liberal and understanding. Wells did not come from an upper class background, much more like a lower lower middle class³. But he was a successful writer at a time those made a difference and clearly he felt, and society confirmed, that he was entitled to privileges. And of course, from a social point of view, his behavior was in no way exceptional in the circles he moved. And in a sense it is not much more puzzling than polygamy, a concession to male egotism *par excellence*. His wife gave him emotional security leaving his back free to explore. There are too many women to remember and keep track of, not only for the reader but for Wells himself, who no doubt had forgotten most of them while he was writing down his memories. But occasionally some one-night incident as with a prostitute coon in Washington DC (he had some time to kill after an interview with Theodore Roosevelt) and who begged him to return, sticks to his mind. To make a prostitute 'fall in love' with you, is something too gratifying to hide from the reader. As to serious affairs we have in the beginning of his adulterous career older or contemporary women such as Violet Hunt, a daughter of the well-known Pre-Raphaelite painter Hunt as well as a writer and keeper of salons, whom he only mentions in passing, but more seriously there is the case of Elizabeth von Arnim an Australian adventurist. She had had some rather unsatisfying marriages to Austrian nobility and belatedly having discovered sex as well as the possibility available to her through her best-sellerism⁴, was able as a female predator on her own to play with Wells on more or less equal terms, in fact had she not the edge after all, conducting the affair on her own terms, and eventually dumping him, when he no longer was able to play the lover's part assigned to him. Throughout the affair she was on the best term with his wife. Then there were escapades with much younger women, teenagers at the time, such as Rosamund and also more notoriously Amber Reeves with whom he lived in France and begot a child with. Lodge makes much of those affairs which more than any others shows a bad light on Wells. Was he simply a grabber of pussies, like our present notorious president, and who would in the modern age of Metoo be publicly revealed and destroyed? Who knows. Or maybe women simply threw himself at his feet, and as noted above he simply could not say no⁵? This might be more plausible, after all he was a serious worker of writing, and his work and his visions took pride of place and it is doubtful that he

³ Orwell apparently had 27 categories of social classes and once described himself as belonging to the lower upper middle classes, or some such combination.

⁴ Her book 'An enchanted April' was very much appreciated. I have reviewed it in these volumes, finding it rather bland not to say innocuous. As I understand she is more or less forgotten by now, but so what, she reaped the benefits in life, and who really profits from an enhanced post-humus reputation, except possible descendants?

⁵ Maybe not always, one woman who had offered himself and of whom he soon tired showed up at

would unnecessarily risk humiliation, and active predation takes a lot of time and energy better employed in other ways. One may simply take his word that there was enough willing and sensuous women around who was attracted to the prestige of having him as a lover. Amber Reeves was a brilliant student but to his disappointment came out short when left on her own. Then Rebecca West turned out to be much more intriguing and intellectually satisfying. In fact West he almost fell in love with, he did, for some reason, not go all the way qualifying her as his Love-shadow. Anyway he did have a child with her, not on her prompting as with Reeves, but due to his own initial carelessness, for which he agreed he must take full responsibility. However, the most interesting case was that of the adventuress Odette Keun, which is vintage Wells peccadillo, and on which he dwells with unsentimental detachment. And in fact she is the only one of his lovers which comes across with any vividness.

Odette Keun was a writer and an admirer, and to Wells physically attractive. She imposed herself on him when he was dying to extricate himself from Rebecca West. Keun should really be classified as a Bad Woman, he writes, she was as he puts it a *thoroughly nasty and detestable person; vain, noisy and weakly outrageous*. Yet, she was in her warped but intense way affectionate and she made him laugh and for all her spasmodic efforts she was unable to hurt him deeply. Had she not been so pitiful and had they been able to laugh deeper together, sharing things which make minds fuse, she might have been the greatest lark he had ever had and thus he may still have been living with her. And then he goes on and writes *She was immensely vain, she could not bear to think that she was ridiculous. She could not bear the thought of being laughed about,... She had to be the great, magnificent, intricate, wonderful, potent,...She was indeed not sane, she was crazy with vanity, with the cruelest vindictiveness if ever her vanity was bruised. Periodically she was mad, I think, certifiably mad.* and he concludes that he did his best with her, be it clumsily so. He then launches a lengthy account of her troubled background, as far as he is able to piece together from the fragmented evidence she had given him over the years, as if it could give a clue to her outrageousness. From an early age she seems to have had an itch to write, and most of what she wrote there was an element of the abusive letter, in fact she developed into a regular abusive letter writer, be it to friends and strangers. Odette in her essence is intently scribbling for dear life, penciling (as the pencil allows a higher speed) at a furious pace, fluently, unhesitatingly, and then rushing off to the post office before there being any opportunity for second thoughts. How could he put up with it, especially as there always were alternatives, he did not have the temperament nor was he constrained by the necessity to hack it out in a bad marriage. The word that comes to your mind is

his home in a raincoat just before he was going to an important dinner appointment. Shedding her coat revealing that she wore nothing but shoes and stockings and threatening to commit suicide unless he took her back, actually slashed her wrists when his attention was temporarily engaged elsewhere, making literally a bloody mess on his carpet, which he had to replace. Medical assistance was secured, he was late for his appointment, necessitating yet another change of clothes, but he gratefully noted that the newspapers showed admirable restraint. Would they do so now? He concluded that she was mentally unhinged and that she had learned how to slash her wrists for maximal effect and minimal danger to herself. Many years later she seems to have recovered, married, and Wells was fully prepared to resume friendly relations.

'lark' now out of fashion. He describes how she appeared in his hotel room, after he had definitely broken off with West, a young woman, flimsily wrapped and exuding an aroma of Jasmine, protesting her complete adoration for him and her overriding ambition to be at his service. Never one to resist a sensuous temptation and few men would have. He expounds on her mental qualities, terming her intelligence discursive and liable to splash widely. In fact everything she did splashed and she was anything copious in whatever she did. At times acute, but most often merely obvious. He made it clear that her domain was in France, where he had a joint house built, while providing for her financially with the object of eventually making her independent. On the other hand England was off limits to her, there he was with his wife. He introduced her to friends, and she gradually became aware that he was much richer than she had initially expected, and that his social influence was much greater than she had ever been able to imagine. Almost all the celebrities she came across were part of his social circles. She had indeed got more than she bargained for. As times went on she became more and more exasperating. Not only did she have her moods, in social settings her idea of entertainment was to show off. Alone with him, she was mostly devotional, but in company more and more unbearable until she became more and more of a social liability. His amazement at her social ineptness started to give way to rage. She started to brag about their sexual intimacy to all and sundry. He would sulk and retreated and she would make up, scented in jasmine and attractively disrobed, and the love-making would start again. As noted, the story he tells would be understandable if concerning a couple caught in a warped passion of love and hate, but he was all the time in control, accepting as much out of a cold calculation taking into account what he got out of it, his eyes open feeling no desire to fool himself that he was in love. He needed the physical outlet in order to get on with his work, which he did very well, and not being in love with her he could limit the role he would play in his life. We have already alluded to her geographical restraint, to that he added a social one, namely he need not introduce her to friends who would not like her. Although she got to be more and more exasperating, she nevertheless continued to be a lark to him, and she did not interfere with his work, as he was not allowing her to do so. Secretly he set up a fund to make her financially independent in anticipation of the final break.

From the point of view of Wells, he appears like a miracle of forbearance and a wonder of generosity. He the established writer of renown, she the dilettante voided of any talent. Maybe from her point of view he would appear haughty and ungrateful and ultimately not worthy of her devotion.

In his later life the Russian lady filled the role of his Love-Shadow but she tantalizingly deprived him of the ultimate comfort of a settled home and a devoted wife, which he above all sought. The last years he spent at Hanover Square seeing the lights of his life being slowly extinguished. Death through a heart attack did not come at night as wanted but during an afternoon, a month or so short of his 80th birthday.

As to his loves he claims that he only got what he gave, and whenever he got a woman, the woman got a man. In other words as to the extent he took advantage, so did his partner.

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