

Chapter Twenty-one

THUS TO REVISIT



THE event of my visit to London in 1920 was the beginning of my friendship with H G Wells There was no aloofness or coldness in approaching him, no barriers to break down as with most Englishmen, his twinkling eyes were like those of a mischievous boy I was pleased to find he had no beard and no white hair, because it seemed to me I had heard of him since I had begun to think at all

Wells had ranged every field of knowledge, had dared to invade the sacrosanct precincts of the historian, the economist, and the scientist and, though a layman in these fields, had used his extraordinary gifts to interpret the past and present and even prophesy the future, in novel after novel he had shocked England by championing women's right to a freer life

We in the United States were just beginning to be affected by sociological concepts, only Henry George and Edward Bellamy had previously opened up this new world of the imagination Now here was Wells giving a fresh picture of what could be if man had an ideal system of society that was workable At Columbia Colony he had been quoted repeatedly On my lecture tour in 1916 his name had been on everybody's lips, and he had signed the letter to President Wilson protesting against the Federal indictment I believed he had influenced the American intelligentsia more than any other one man

For good reason countless faithful friends had attached themselves to Wells, and he included in his varied, intricate, and unpredictable personality a capacity for loyally loving both individuals and humanity

People who had never met Wells always thought they knew him best, especially Londoners I was stopping with three maiden sisters in Hampstead Gardens, and a great furor arose as soon as it was known in the household that Mrs Wells had sent me an invitation for what was to be my first week-end at Easton Glebe in Essex What was I to wear? Was I going to take the blue net or the flowered chiffon? They were greatly disappointed when I carried only a small bag in which there was no room for fluffy evening gowns

Wells himself was waiting on the platform at Dunmow Station, and we drove in his little car, called the Pumpkin, to Easton Glebe, a part of the Warwick Estate on which he held a life lease The former rectory was built of old stone, ivy-covered, lovely lawns were spread around it Early morning tea was served in your room, shoes put out at night were properly polished, hot water was plentiful for your bath, and extra pitchers were brought with towels wrapped around carefully to keep in the steam

During the course of the next two days I realized more than ever before how sensitive H G was to the slightest intonation To be with him meant you had to be on the alert every second lest you miss something of him He could be amusing, witty, sarcastic, brilliant, flirtatious, and yet profound at once, all in his thin, small voice, speaking high up into the roof of his mouth, as do many English, instead of back in the throat as we do

I returned Monday evening about midnight to my room at Hampstead, having spent the day in town seeing people But no sooner had I closed the door than steps pattered in the hallway and a soft hand tapped In came the three ladies, hair in braids, warmly and most modestly swathed in voluminous, white cotton nighties, long-sleeved and tight around the neck They had stayed wide-awake to hear all about my week-end I told them as much as I could remember of the place and the stimulating fellow guests, one in particular with whom I had been having an interesting discussion When I had finished the eldest leaned forward and hesitatingly but loudly whispered, "Did he try to kiss you?"

"What? Who?" I asked, having in mind the man I had just been praising

"Why—why—don't you know?"

"Know what?"

She looked a little abashed at this, and another voice explained apologetically, "Sister means that Wells has a magnetic influence over women!"

"Was he fascinating?" the youngest eagerly took up the catechism

For two solid hours I was bombarded with questions, H G was the Don Juan of spinsterhood in England. That there was a Mrs Wells for whom Mr Wells cared deeply did not matter in the least to them.

I wish I could do justice to Jane, as Catherine Wells was affectionately called. This devoted mother, perfect companion, was the complete helpmate, managing H G's finances, reading the proofs of his books, seeing that all editions were up-to-date, letting no publisher be delinquent in his royalties. She did not pretend to be a Feminist, she was there to protect him, performing the duties of an English wife towards her husband and appearing with him so that they might make a united front to the world. The relationship between them was on a fine plane.

Although H G had told me once "the sun would set if anything ever happened to Jane" I felt that he had never put her adequately into his books as the great woman she really was, he was too close to her. After she died, his touching introduction to *The Book of Catherine Wells* proved that he realized what she had been in his life.

Jane was always mothering people and looking after their comfort. At a later time when I happened to be at Easton Glebe, she was distressed and anxious that I was taking it for granted I had to have an ice-pack on my neck every night because my tubercular glands were bothering me. She insisted and insisted something must be done, until finally my tonsils were removed, the true source of my trouble. I owed this tremendous relief to Jane's interest, which would not let me go on being sick.

The gay wit and gift for mimicry were not confined to H G alone. On one of my visits I was shown a new bathroom, and we viewed solemnly the tiny, almost microscopic, tub. Jane was slight and small, and I was quite sure it was meant for her and not for H G's rotund frame. She maintained, however, it had been installed for his convenience, and made funny suction noises as though a large and deep well

were being pumped dry I was hilarious, but he, pretending to be irritated, yet laughing too, growled at her, "What are you trying to do? Make my bathing an international joke?"

The little things H G said, many of them jibes at himself, were always amusing. Even more so were the drawings with which he decorated his letters. If he did not want to go somewhere he might perhaps illustrate his reluctance by picturing himself being dragged off, or, if he desired the absence rather than the presence of a person at a meeting, he would portray him being pushed out unceremoniously. These ingenious caricatures allowed many subtleties which even he would not like to put into words over his own signature.

Jane was unsurpassed when it came to charades, and never minded having the house turned upside down in the search for properties. But the Wells family did not have to depend upon orthodox pastimes, they often made up their own. H G had invented a ball game which was played Sunday mornings in a barn made over into a sort of indoor court. Unlike tennis, many could take part at once and the sport was so exhausting that when they finished they were usually dripping with perspiration. I did not play, other novices seemed to be doing badly enough without me. If you did not feel up to anything so strenuous, you could take a short walk through the charming garden which Jane had so lovingly arranged, or a long one through the woods, by the lakes, or bordering the streams of the Warwick Estate, of which H G had free use. Every season had its different aspects of beauty.

Sunday afternoons and evenings were especially merry. The atmosphere at Easton Glebe was like nothing else, something that does not exist here, where the elders have their bridge and their conversation and the young go dancing or to the movies. There, all ages mixed together in fun, in laughter. The two sons, Frank and "Gyp," who were then at Cambridge, might bring from ten to fifteen friends home for tea, a great function over which Jane so graciously presided. The maids went out after setting the table for supper and preparing cold meats on the buffet, and the party then took care of itself, everybody serving everybody else. The boys were full of devilment and it was most uproarious.

I often wondered how the unexpected arrivals were provided for, but Jane was a remarkable hostess, I have known her to have a house-

ful at Easton Glebe for lunch and give a brilliant dinner in London that same evening. Every guest was planned for, no one was ever huddled with another, appropriate games were produced or friends invited who might be interesting or helpful. When they were ready to leave, all were put on the most convenient trains and returned to town with as little trouble to themselves as possible.

From 1920 on I never went to England without spending part of the time with H G, and many of the most attractive people I met were at Easton Glebe. I always came away enriched by these contacts and the talks we had together. Conversation was a combination of current topics, science, philosophy, history. The English might not have had the same light flippancy or such a scattered fund of information as the average American, who usually qualified his statements with, "I read that—" or "I know someone who—," but they did speak out of their own experience. Furthermore, they could toss the ball of repartee back and forth objectively and not become irritated or let creep into their voices that personal note which implied they had now settled the whole thing.

Each one at Easton Glebe had his turn in the spotlight, it was never a monologue, which a man in H G's position might have made it. No subject could be mentioned that he did not have its complete history and a definite opinion on it as well, including Neo-Malthusianism in all its implications.

These week-ends were inspiration and recreation. The serious duty which called me to England was lecturing. The Neo-Malthusian League had few speakers at that time to address women audiences, and wished me to test out the response to their propaganda.

English public sentiment on birth control had vastly changed since I had been there in 1915, largely because Marie Stopes' book had had such wide circulation during the after-War period, her voice had made articulate the feelings of the millions of unemployed. That people now knew what birth control meant was due in part also to Harold Cox, one of the finest orators of his generation, who had been the first to point out that its condemnation by medical men and Anglican clergy should carry little weight, because the birth rates among them were lower than those of almost any other classes. Notable exceptions who had come out favorably were Sir James Barr, ex-President of the

British Medical Association, Dr C Killick Millard, Health Officer of Leicester in the North, Dean Inge of St Paul's, and the Bishop of Birmingham, who was Chairman of the English National Birth Rate Commission, England was accustomed to clarifying new and controversial subjects by such bodies, summoning experts to testify

Dr Alice Vickery arranged for me to give a series of talks, many before lower middle-class workers' wives who belonged to the Women's Co-operative Guild. In different districts of London they came together, paying their little bit, perhaps sixpence a month, to listen to speakers, afterwards serving tea and conversing in a friendly way among themselves. Though their economic uncertainty made them resigned to having ten or twelve children, the fact that the Guild had just brought out a book describing some of the tragic cases of its own members and the deaths from over-childbearing helped to pave the way.

Of all the slums I visited in trams, on buses, via the Underground, the one of worst repute at the time was the dockyards section of Rotherhithe. I held a small demonstration clinic there—in a sense the first of its kind in England. The eager women who came, amazingly ignorant of any possible beauty in marriage, were envious of a few in the community who, though the fathers were receiving no higher wages than their own husbands, had had only two or three children and consequently could afford to send them to the trade school. They themselves were, if not sliding backward, at least no more than holding their own, but those few families were definitely on the way up in the social scale. And it had all come to pass because Dr Vickery and Anne Martin, a friend of hers who had labored there for two decades as a social worker, had given some contraceptive information about ten years earlier.

Although Dr Vickery had on numerous occasions raised the question of birth control before gatherings bent on other matters, it fell to my lot to discuss it first as a public health issue. I was told I might have three minutes to address a national health Conference on Maternal and Infant Welfare to be held at Brighton. Considering the four hours required in transit this might seem a short time, but I was happy to have even as much as that. So I went.

With the prospect of reaching university students I traveled to

Cambridge In the midst of the weathered spires, the ivied halls, and the storied dignity of Trinity and Kings, Noel Porter and his wife, Bevan, had converted an old public house, The Half Moon, into a home, yet had managed to keep its original atmosphere of convivial hospitality The tap-room had once opened directly on Little St Mary's Lane, now the bar had been removed, but the ancient sign still swung back and forth and the smoky ceilings and mildewed paneling were the same as when former generations had congregated there over mugs of ale

Opposite was a tiny, old-fashioned graveyard, no longer used, and I went out there and let the sun beat against my aching back It was amusing to have to resort to a cemetery for privacy, but the house was constantly filled with hatless students coming and going through the enormous downstairs room which served as rendezvous for all In the afternoons these youths on the threshold of manhood came to talk over the questions which were perplexing them, in the evenings they had little meetings, at one of which I spoke

Guy Aldred, who was in Scotland, had planned my schedule there, and I had three weeks of a Scottish summer—bluebells so thick in spots that the ground was azure, long twilights when the lavender heather faded the hills into purple

When I had been in Glasgow before, I had encountered only officials, but on this occasion I met the people in their homes and found them quite opposite to the stingy, tight-fisted, middle-class stereotype They were hospitable, generous, mentally alert, just as witty as the Irish and in much the same way, which rather surprised me

Fourth of July, Sunday, we had a noon meeting on the Glasgow Green Nearly two thousand shipyard workers in caps and baggy corduroys stood close together listening in utter, dead stillness without cough or whisper That evening I spoke in a hall under Socialist auspices, Guy Aldred acting as chairman One old-timer said he had been a party member for eleven years, attending Sunday night lectures regularly, but never before had he been able to induce his wife to come, tonight he could not keep her home "Look!" he cried in amazement "The women have crowded the men out of this hall I never saw so many wives of comrades before"

The men were there, partly through curiosity to hear the American and partly through interest in the subject, ready to fight the ancient battle of Marx against Malthus. Efforts of the English Neo-Malthusians to introduce birth control to the masses had been hampered not only by the opposition of the upper classes, but more especially by the persistent hostility of the orthodox Socialists.

Marx, dealing with problems after they had arisen, had taught that any reform likely to dull the edge of poverty was bad for Socialism because it made labor less dissatisfied. It followed that if a man had to fight for the hungers and necessities of ten or twelve children, he made a better revolutionary. "Let 'em have as many as they can," was the cry. On the other hand, if birth control were practiced by the working classes, the wage earner who could support two children and knew how not to have more was going to be content and would not struggle against conditions of economic insecurity. Hence he was likely to forget "the Revolution."

Knowing that the Scotch took mental notes of items on which to debate, I had tried to prepare myself well, and I produced the unanswerable argument to this theory. "Why do you demand higher wages then," I asked, "when what you really want is privation? If misery is your weapon you should not insist on an eight-hour day but on a twelve- or fourteen-hour one. You should pile up your grievances, and pile them up higher. However, in spite of your best efforts I believe your hunger-revolution will, as it has always done, capitulate to whatever force or government will fill your stomachs."

Socialists, like anarchists and syndicalists, were used to contesting Malthusianism on economic grounds, but, unlike the others, they had as a part of their platform the freedom of woman. I pointed out that she could have the sort of freedom they desired for her right here and now through birth control.

When I ended, Guy Aldred asked, "Now are there any questions?" After a few somewhat irrelevant ones, silence fell, confronted by their own philosophy they could see it. One man finally rose, "We'd like to hear what the Chairman thinks of all this. Does he believe birth control will do what the lady speaker claims for it?" Apparently they were waiting for their cue. But Guy Aldred was not to be drawn. After

giving him an opportunity to express himself they plunged in and said their say Even some women who had never been on their feet before got up to tell dramatic, vivid, personal stories

The next day I was on my way to a town not far from Dunfermline, Andrew Carnegie's birthplace I arrived about four o'clock in a driving storm, lacking both umbrella and raincoat No taxi had ever graced the railroad station, and we trudged through the rain to the cottage of one of the "most advanced friends of labor" I was soaking wet up to the knees A hurry-call was sent to neighbors for dry clothing, but among that population of five thousand not a single woman had an extra skirt to lend, and only after long search was a new pair of Sunday shoes forthcoming

Because there was not an inn within miles, I slept that night with my hostess in the one bed the house contained, the husband stretched himself out on two chairs in the kitchen Since Sylvia Pankhurst had been similarly accommodated just a few months before, I knew I was having the best the village afforded

The inhabitants had been dispatched from Lancashire factory towns during the War for special munitions work, and here they had stayed and made their homes Practically all had been apprenticed to the mills at the age of eight or nine Girls, because they were destined for marriage and therefore needed no education, had worked ten or twelve hours a day throughout their adolescence, and even after their weddings up to the time pregnancy was well advanced As a result, the young mothers, who had never, from childhood to maturity, had a chance to become rested and get the fatigue out of their systems, had apparently transmitted their weariness to their children, the first-born were sleepy, inert, and always tired A doctor told me it was common for boys and girls of five, six, and seven to fall asleep at their school desks and have to be awakened

When I had arrived in England I had gone to see Havelock in the quaint old Cornwall village where he was living alone since Edith's death Winding pathways, well-trodden and embraced on either side by rambling shrubbery and verbena, led from his house to the sea hundreds of feet below The waves dashed continuously against the crags and rocks, and thousands of gulls shrieked or sailed majestically almost in front of my eyes

We had then talked about going to Ireland where I could make a foray into my own genealogy. Mother's ancestors at some stage had been the same as Edward Fitzgerald's and I thought I might find some of the places from which they had sprung. I had no exact information—just tradition from childhood days. Now, after my strenuous lecturing, I needed a brief holiday, and Havelock also wanted a vacation, so we joined forces.

My primary purpose was frustrated because after half a century nobody in any of the little villages seemed to know anything definite. At Glengariff they said, "Sure, and I thought it was Killarney your grandfather was born in." But at Killarney I was told, "Oh, it was Cork your family came from. My grandmother knew them very well."

More difficult to surmount than the vague discursiveness of these good people was the Sinn Féin Rebellion, in the thick of which we found ourselves. The night before we reached Cork there had been a raid and the leaders were in hiding. Everywhere we went we could sense a subtle, surreptitious undercurrent—in the hotels, in the restaurants, among small, whispering groups which dispersed when any stranger approached.

Ireland had great natural beauty, and I was sorry to see the beginnings of ugly, modern industrialism cropping up, especially in Cork with the Ford factory. The mustard-colored kilts of the men astonished me, I had never known the Irish wore them, but they were trying to bring back their ancestral dress along with the Gaelic language. Always their kindness and interest and the sadness in their voices moved me deeply. They were never too sad, however, to give a quick turn to a phrase. One morning the tram in which we were riding suddenly stopped. Nobody knew why, everybody was complaining. Then from a side street came a handful of Black and Tans with bayonets fixed. I asked the Irishman sitting beside me, "What does that mean?"

"You should know," he replied. "Those are Wilson's Fourteen Pints."

Havelock was a delightful companion, not loquacious, but keenly interested in everything, and forever jotting down his copious notes. We hired a two-wheeled jaunting car in which we sat back to back, and in this way bumped from Glengariff to Killarney. Occasionally the sun broke through for half an hour, but it was wet that year—potatoes

and hay were rotting on the ground because the sun did not shine long enough to dry them

We arrived at the inn, drenched and sopping. Havelock, with his typically English dread of a cold, went to bed, but I stayed up talking with a young woman and three equally young traveling priests—Sinn Feiners all. We chatted desultorily until I happened to mention I had a letter to the widow of the hero, Skeffington, who had been killed in the disturbances.

The company, assuming me to be one with their cause, immediately became most friendly. The girl began discussing higher education for her sex. I asked her how she could keep on when she married and had the inevitable succession of offspring. The priests, somewhat to my surprise, fell in with my ideas by deploring too large families, some of the older sons and daughters had to emigrate, and even those who were left could not care adequately for their parents. It would be better for the Catholic Church as well as for the world if they could help people to have only a few children and bring them up decently. I felt hopeful because they were speaking of birth control as solving some of their own problems, they were saying exactly what I most wanted them to say.

Several happy days we spent at Killarney, exploring on foot, on horseback, and in boats. The men who drove the cart or rowed us through the lakes always knew the old myths of the mountains and poured into our ears tales of leprechauns and other "little people." You heard the word "divil" more than any other. Here the divil, so they told us, had left his step, there he had run away. The shape of every mountain, the twist of every stream had their stories.

Wherever we went women, lean and elderly, wearing tiny shoulder shawls and calico print dresses, fairly started out of the hillsides, bare-headed, barefooted, complexions like roses, and eyes as blue as the sky. Yet their faces were hungry and worn. Getting on in years as they were, they could and did run faster than our ponies. When we spurred forward they came right along, flattering, cajoling, uttering prayers and "God bless you's," calling on all the saints to preserve you if you would buy a drop of "Mountain Dew," which was so good for your health. If you bought this Irish whiskey from one, another took her place, and, quite undiscouraged, began again the flow of sales talk.

One of our last days, when the wraiths of the lake dimmed the emerald hills, we walked to red-bricked Killarney House, to which, as Havelock said, nature was adding her own wild beauty to the beauty that man had made

All of Ireland had seemed draped in mist and sadness and, lovely as it had been, I never wanted to go back