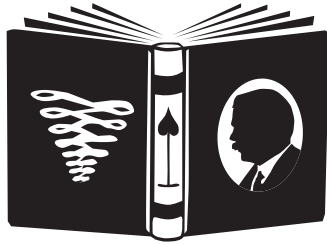

H.G. WELLS
~ FESTIVAL ~



FOLKESTONE
19 & 20 SEPTEMBER 2009

Runner-up

'The Red Book'
A Tale of the Unexpected

by Mike Umbers
Age 72, Retired Army Officer, Hythe

Toby and I were at the Harvey together and we've been friends ever since, and Sam is my sister, so their decision finally to get married has pleased us all, Janine and me, and my mother of course she's chosen her hat already, though the wedding is not to be until next year because Sam is still completing her Canterbury College course in Eng Lit and Creative Writing. I must say Toby has been really supportive of her and it can't have been easy for him they simply do not have the same literary tastes. He's a bore about Dickens, and she's so mad on Wells, I mean, Wells of all people! He's not exactly fashionable today, is he? But she says his science fiction stuff has masked his 'real agenda' which is politics, and her thesis which she's now working on for her final year is on his 'socio-economic-Darwinism'! What she didn't know when she started was that 2009 is Darwin's Anniversary Year, and also Wells' Anniversary Year, and there's going to be this Festival about 'HG' in Folkestone and some old guy is even giving a prize for a story in HG's style, so Sam feels she's right there at the cutting edge of modern criticism!

'Wells was a modern,' I've heard her say. 'He lifted the paperweight off the old Victorian prudish mores, he created a new world based on new humanist standards. Not like your old Dickens with his moralising.' And Toby would come back: 'Dickens set standards of family life. He exemplified Christian values.' 'Rubbish. Look how he treated his wife, and after having all those children he blamed her for them, as if he'd not played any part in it. Wells said birth control liberated women.' 'It certainly liberated him, the old goat. He cheated on both his wives.' 'He had a Utopian vision. He wanted to free people from their defensive little houses (he actually said that, Toby, 'defensive little houses'), and give them social and sexual freedom.' 'Well I know he said one of his women I forget which it was was nasty and vain and noisy and outrageous and she excited him a great deal! He even said one was "interestingly hairy" his whole view of women was disgusting and sexist. You wouldn't like it if I spoke about you like that.' 'That was Odette Keun, the noisy one. But he also said "When I got a woman, a woman got a man!" None of them ever complained.' 'Well, you've got a man, Sam, are you complaining?' 'Not a lot,' she said, 'Kiss me Toby'

Their arguments usually end like this with them going into smoochy mode, and that's when I creep away; I'm not into Dickens or Wells, so I leave them to it, but I've become involved because of the extraordinary 'Tale of the Unexpected' (as Sam calls it) which happened that Saturday early this year. Our usual group of four Old Harveians had met as usual at midday in the Castle in Saltwood and had our usual ration of two pints apiece to set the world to rights, and Toby mentioned he was going down into Hythe to buy Sam a birthday present he was hoping to find something quirky and off-beat to please her. I resisted the temptation to joke that when they've been married as long as Janine and I have, he probably won't even remember her birthday, and off he went with Charles, one of our group, who dropped him at the Cinema Roundabout. You may not know where I mean people still call it the Cinema Roundabout, though the Ritz is long gone it's sheltered housing now, flats for old people. Then he strolled down the High Street. Now Toby stresses that he was NOT drunk, not on two pints of standard pub bitter, and I believe him; he wasn't ill or stressed either, or even over-tired, he felt fine, and he was enjoying his search of the bric-a-brac and the bookshelves in the Charity Shops.

There was another new one; they keep on opening more, and replacing the old shops. Some people say there are too many of them, but they're a lot more fun than Building Societies. This one was on the left hand side and seemed to be mainly books, so that looked promising, and Toby says he actually thought as he stepped inside and an old-fashioned bell above the door tinkled, that it reminded him of Kipp's Bookshop 'on the left hand side of the Hythe High Street coming from Folkestone, between the yard of the livery stable and the shop window full of old silver and such-like things...' Well, no livery stable now of course, but there was silver in the next shop. And Toby was still smiling at the thought and thinking he must tell Sam, when he looked at the man who came out of the back room through a glazed door with a net curtain over it, and he saw he had on a high collar and a floppy black tie, and it turned him off the place because he thought 'How ridiculously affected to dress up to keep an old bookshop'. You expect that sort of thing when the Chamber of Commerce arranges one of those Fun Days at Christmas, but this was an ordinary Saturday. The other thing was that it was so dark in there after the bright street that he couldn't see to read, and he was peering about at the shelves and piles of books all around when the man stepped forward round the counter and pulled the little chain that hung from the light-fitting, and Toby realised that it was actually a gas-light, which he thought even more ridiculous than a wing collar. Anyway, at least he could see now.

He checked out the Dickens first, of course, for interesting editions or early criticism, but quickly moved on to the Wells shelf, There was a rather nicely bound 'Complete Works' or at least the main ones in umpteen volumes, but the print was rather small, and Sam had all the works she needed anyway of course. And there were a couple of early Studies on Wells she certainly would have already read he reckoned, and a Memoir by someone he'd never heard of and no pictures in it, so he was turning away when one slim volume which had got pushed back on the shelf caught his eye. It was bright red, and in good condition though dusty, and it was hand-written inside, someone's personal notes obviously, rather old-fashioned writing and a bit faded, on lined pages. There was no name mentioned, and

the inside cover simply said 'Notes on HG Wells'. The price was written there too, in pencil £20.00! Now that was steep, nothing old-fashioned about that! Typical 'catch the tourist' prices the same book in Truro or Stockport would be two or three pounds at the most, but down here they were exploiting the local connection with Wells. It was the same when he'd been looking for Thomas Hardy in Dorset ridiculous prices. Actually Toby was perfectly ready to spend £20 on his bride-to-be (he was very keen to assure me of that when he told us the story later), but he was hesitant to fork out so much for something as problematically useful to her as this. She got so many books from the College and through the Library service that he couldn't keep up with her reading, but being hand-written this was obviously personal stuff so it could be interesting and original; pity there was no name or date on it though. When he asked about it, the man was off hand: 'Dunno reely,' he shrugged, 'ain't read it meself.'

Toby flicked through the pages but frankly he was put off by this dismissive reply, put off the book and put off the shop. He was not prepared to spend £20 on this. Then as he flipped it shut to replace it, the word 'Darwin' caught his eye and looking more closely, this sentence (as well as he could recall it next day): 'Mr Wells was a Darwinist and embraced Evolution, but he attacked optimists and warned that in the course of future history human progress was not inevitable'. And on the next page: 'Wells was ready to accept that Darwinism justified wars on weaker species and inferior races'. Now Sam had said something very like that to Toby, when they were discussing The Time Machine, and he warmed to the unknown writer. He moved to another part of the book and read again. 'Unfortunately for Wells, any attempts to move his reforms from paper to public life were thwarted. The details of his personal life were the one thing which kept him from achieving any political aspirations.' Now this was good stuff! Toby was the more inclined to buy this 'original work' for Sam if it supported an original view of Wells (and one not unlike his own too!) If it was a draft that had been published in book form later and she'd come across it, surely she'd have mentioned it, wouldn't she, during their endless arguments about him? It did seem to be dealing with her very subject from a point of view she could relate to.

'I'll have it anyway,' he said. 'I'll have to give you a cheque though. I just hope it's something she'll be really interested in. Will you wrap it for me, wrap it as a present? It's for my fiancée.' 'Fancy,' said the man, like an echo. 'Yer'll speckylate on it will yer? Well, one book's like another, I say. Somethin' ter read, aint it? I got brahn paper, will that do? An' the cheque to Art Kipps if yer please.' So he was keeping up the act in all its detail, even to the name of the Shop. And the parcel was perfect: it was actually tied with string, swiftly done by practised hands, and a loop left for Toby to carry it away.

Sam's birthday was on the Sunday, and Toby took her breakfast up and put the book on the tray. Then he went downstairs and hugged himself at the thought of her opening her card and present, and finding he'd cleverly found something that really would interest her, and even be useful to her. Of course I got all this from him afterwards. The first I heard of any of it was from her. We all met at Mum's that afternoon for Sam's Birthday Tea. I was there with Janine, and Sam and Toby were just dying to talk about something really odd that had happened to them. 'I opened the card first,' she said, 'sparkly on it and really sappy. I'll keep it for ever. Romantic old fool he is, oh, I do love him, Mike.' And Toby grinned like a teenager and reached for her hand along the settee. Oh, get on with it, I thought. 'Then I looked at the parcel,' she went on, 'and it was so neatly wrapped with new brown paper and white string with a loop for your finger. I normally tear into parcels and rip off the Sellotape, but not this one I undid the knots carefully and wound it up, and folded the paper slowly, I really made it last, to put off looking to see what the book was. And do you know what it was, Mike?' Of course I didn't know, do get on with it, I was thinking again.

Sam paused she was spinning this story out, like she was doing her Creative Writing, and manipulating our reactions. Mum was interested too, and stopped pouring our tea and looked up, the tea-pot suspended. 'Well, it was a red notebook, with lined pages, no writing in it. Cost £2.00. You could get it from anywhere on the High Street. I thought "Oh, it's Toby's joke my real present's downstairs." So I had my tea and toast and got dressed and went downstairs, and he was sitting at the table with the paper, and he looked up, sort of expectantly, didn't you Toby, not laughing as if he'd done something to tease me. And he said "Well, what do you think of it?" So I put it on the table and I said "It's very nice Toby, a very useful notebook! Do I get a present as well?" And he picked it up and looked at it, and his face changed, and he riffled the pages, and he looked at the price inside, and he sort of, well, spluttered, I suppose you'd call it. And he said, "But this isn't it. Where's the book, the hand-written old book?" He thought I was playing a joke on him, now.'

Mum had poured the tea. It takes more than a lost book to stop her Sunday tea. We reached for our cups our Mum is the last person in the world still to be using china cups with saucers, and I took a piece of the birthday cake she can still produce the goods can Mum, I remember the taste of that cake since I was a kid. Janine never touches it now, too worried about her diet, like all the modern girls, but Sam had a slice because she had to, and Toby didn't have to but had two. And while we were eating, Sam finished the story quickly, in one go. The fact is, Toby had gone into a shop and found her a special book, and now she opened the parcel, it wasn't the book he'd bought, and he was wondering about his £20. So they'd driven straight down to the High Street, and would you believe, the shop wasn't

there! The shop next door was it had a cheap shiny tea set on a tray, and he remembered seeing that in the window, thinking it was silver, and he remembered the doorstep which he'd particularly noticed because it was worn and hollowed out with wear like a lot of the old shops in Hythe, but this was a typical 2009 High Street shop, closed, empty and TO LET. He could not possibly have gone in there yesterday and bought a book.

I've been to that spot now, with Toby and Sam, and Janine, and we've stood there and looked at it from all angles, and Toby's been over every detail of what happened to him. And we both believe him, and Sam's upset because some of the things Toby can quote from glancing inside the book, about Wells and Darwin and that, are just what she's been studying she says it's as if someone's already done her thesis, and yet she can't lay hands on it. On Monday Toby rang his Bank and stopped the cheque, but do you know, it's never been presented, and it's five months ago now, and obviously it never will be, so what do you make of that?

As the months have gone by, we've come to terms with it. We've rationalised it, as you do: Toby had a fit of some sort, or just stood on that step and went into a sort of imaginative daydream because he'd been thinking so much about Wells recently. Or if you want to think he slipped into another time frame when Kipps' shop really did stand there, you can think that if you like, but don't forget, Wells invented Mr Kipps and his Shop, so you're supposing that someone's else's imagination created a solid object with a human inhabitant, that's visitable a hundred years later! The red book is solid enough you're holding it, aren't you? So we went to other shops and Artwrite opposite the Town Hall has them, no one else that we could find. Identical, at £2 each. And Clive in there, he knows me, and Toby, and he says he's no recollection of Toby going into his shop that day, and in any case, all his prices are bar-coded on the back not handwritten in pencil inside.

Really now, the affair has been pushed to the back of their minds because they're thinking more about the wedding. And the one that's suffering most from it is me, because I stupidly said I'd type it out for them while it was fresh I'm quite keen on spooky stuff, that programme about Haunted Houses and all that... And I interviewed them seriously and took down the details, especially the little touches that seemed to make it a genuine time-slip (which is what I think it was), like the chain on the gas light, and the net curtain, and I typed it and it came to getting on for three thousand words, and then Sam said, 'Mike, it ought to be written in the book, the red note book,' and I stupidly agreed that was appropriate, and of course then I was stuck with doing the writing, longhand! And if you're going to do that, you have to do it properly, so it'll be my wedding present to them a real labour of love, it took me forever. I've got two fountain pens, haven't used them for years, not since I sat my A Levels up in the Old Hall in the Harvey, and the rubber inside's perished, so I've had to buy ink and dip in (Parker's 'Quink' did you know they've still got that in Artwrite? At my first school I was an Ink Monitor my first public appointment.) What a palaver, and I got inky fingers again! But now I've finished it, I'm pleased. I've done it for them, and I'm pleased my sister and my best friend are getting married at last. After all, they've been living together for nearly six years.

I suppose you can put that down to Wells too, 'social as well as biological evolution' he called it, but Janine calls it 'free love', and for Mum it's 'living in sin', and she can't wait to wear that wedding hat.