

A Slip under the Microscope

H.G.Wells

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Under this title two unrelated stories are collected in a tiny Penguin imprint, namely that of the title and one by name of 'The Door in the Wall'. The latter rings a bell a definite *déjà lu* especially as to the ending connecting imagination and reality, and it is quite possible that I have encountered it before in some collection of Wells stories. The story of the title, however, appears quite new to me. It is in a way the most interesting in view of Wells biography. It was published in 1896¹ in the beginning of his career (when he was publishing a story at the rate of one a month) and refers clearly to his student days as a biology student in London. The plot is simple. A young man of humble background (his father a cobbler) has two ambitions, one, a public one, to be a great scientist and make a difference to the world, the second a private one, namely to win the attention and affection of a fellow female student. The two ambitions do not necessarily conflict, on the contrary. The first step of becoming a great scientist is to excel on the local scene and get ahead in examinations. During the first he has to concede first place to his rival, scholarly and amorously, but he gets his chance to get ahead at the second examination. This includes identifying a slide, under strict conditions not to move it, because then it will be too easy. Our protagonist happens to move it accidentally getting a glimpse of the forbidden part, thereby making the identification easy. Should he take advantage of it? He ponders in anguish and at the end the temptation is too strong to get the better of his rival. He comes out first, and his total score on the two examinations is higher than that of the former. But his triumph is short-lived, his bad conscience eventually gets the better of him and he makes a clean breast with his professor, who feels compelled to charge him with cheating, and not only does he lose the point, which would have put him first anyway, but his entire exam is failed, all according to the rules. The professor feels a bit sorry for him, but what can he do? Rules are rules, even when the cheating was involuntary and voluntarily disclosed. The poor student will lose his fellowship and be done for. A moral tale skillfully concocted, but whose main interest lies in giving a glimpse of life in an educational biological institution, of which Wells had first hand experience, from the 1880's.

The first story is of an entirely different tenor, and published in 1911. It is more in the nature of a science fiction story, without technically being one. It hovers though on the border between the real and unreal, just as a dream. An unhappy motherless boy with a strict and demanding father once steps through a door in a wall and enters an enchanted

¹ actually in the London literary quarterly 'the Yellow Book' which was in existence between 1894 and 1897 and had a reputation for fin de siècle decadence, with Aubrey Beardsley as its first art editor (to whom is credited the idea of the yellow cover, and hence name, to give associations to illicit French novels). Apart from Wells it published contributions by the likes of Henry James, Gissing, Gosse, Beerbohm, Bennet. It survived through its short tenure, in spite of carrying no ads.

garden where he meets all wonderful entities, docile panthers and playmates, a young girl and later an older woman who takes him to a library where she presents him with a book on his life, which pops out of the page as tangible reality. He wants to know what comes later, a page is turned and he is swallowed up by its reality, which turns out to be the one from which he had temporarily escaped. Throughout his life he gets a few opportunities to enter the wall, but the pressing contingencies of his busy life, prevents him, but the dream of that happy escape through the door never leaves him. And in the end he, an important cabinet minister, is found dead at the bottom of shaft by a construction site. To it led a door, which he naturally must have mistaken for 'the real thing'. Interpretations are legion, and too obvious to be really interesting, the charm of the story lies in the mood it conveys.

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