

Herbert G. Wells, *The Crystal Egg*

LITERARY BITS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

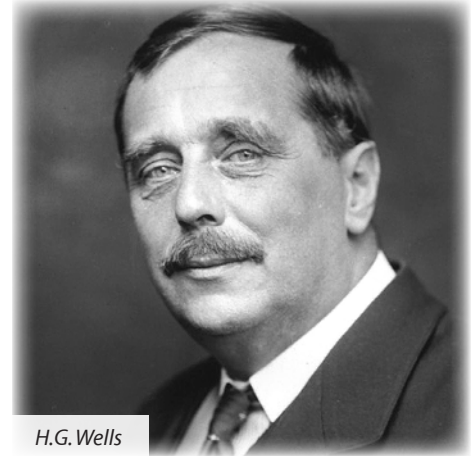
HERBERT GEORGE WELLS

Herbert George Wells was born in London in 1866 and died in the same city in 1946.

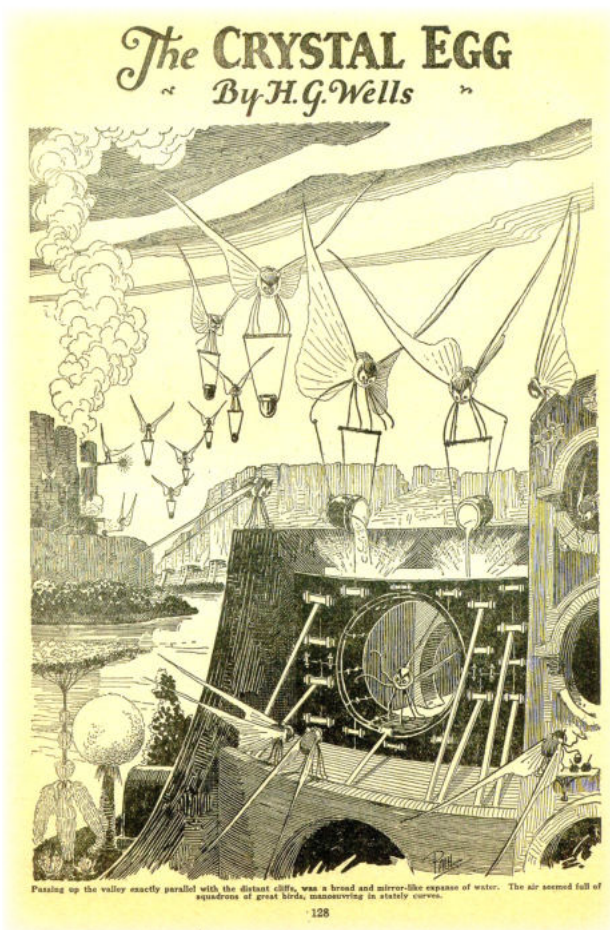
He was a school teacher, but after an accident that damaged his kidneys, he decided that he would be a writer. His first works were textbooks of biology and geography, but then he moved to fiction and wrote about fifty novels that can be divided into three groups: scientific or fantastic romances in the manner of Jules Verne, comic novels and novels of ideas with a didactic purpose.

Among the scientific and fantastic novels we remember: 'The Time Machine' (1895), 'The Island of Dr Moreau' (1896), 'The Invisible Man' (1897) and 'The War of the Worlds' (1898).

These novels are about the impact of alien races or advanced science on society and have become successful films.



H.G. Wells



ABOUT THE NOVEL

THE CRYSTAL EGG

The science fiction short story was written in 1897 and appeared on American television in a series called 'Tales of Tomorrow' in 1951.

The owner of an old curiosity shop, Charles Cave, has an extremely attractive and mysterious crystal egg that he refuses to sell by asking an absurd price. The man becomes obsessed with the egg and observes it night and day.

The crystal reflects light in the middle of the night and Mr Cave notices a foreign land inside the egg. He shares his findings only with his friend Mr Wace, who is a doctor. The two men think that the strange creatures inside are Martians and try to attract their attention.

Later Mr Cave is found dead and his family sells the egg and so the mystery remains unsolved. Mr Wace believes that the egg is a window to the planet Mars.

THE TEXT

A WINDOW TO MARS

A series of short extracts to describe the interior of the crystal egg and Mr Cave and Mr Wace's theories.

1. It occurred to Mr Cave that this was not in accordance with the laws of optics as he had known them in his younger days. He could understand the rays being refracted by the crystal and coming to a focus in its interior, but this diffusion jarred with his physical conceptions. He approached the crystal nearly, peering into it and round it, with a transient revival of the scientific curiosity that in his youth had determined his choice of a calling. He was surprised to find the light not steady, but writhing within the substance of the egg, as though that object was a hollow sphere of some luminous vapour. In moving about to get different points of view, he suddenly found that he had come between it and the ray, and that the crystal none the less remained luminous. Greatly astonished, he lifted it out of the light ray and carried it to the darkest part of the shop. It remained bright for some four or five minutes, when it slowly faded and went out. He placed it in the thin streak of daylight, and its luminousness was almost immediately restored.

2. The view, as Mr Cave described it, was invariably of an extensive plain, and he seemed always to be looking at it from a considerable height, as if from a tower or a mast. To the east and to the west the plain was bounded at a remote distance by vast reddish cliffs, which reminded him of those he had seen in some picture; but what the picture was Mr Wace was unable to ascertain. These cliffs passed north and south – he could tell the points of the compass by the stars that were visible of a night – receding in an almost illimitable perspective and fading into the mists of the distance before they met. He was nearer the eastern set of cliffs, on the occasion of his first vision the sun was rising over them, and black against the sunlight and pale against their shadow appeared a multitude of soaring forms that Mr Cave regarded as birds. A vast range of buildings spread below him; he seemed to be looking down upon them; and as they approached the blurred and refracted edge of the picture, they became indistinct. There were also trees curious in shape, and in colouring, a deep mossy green and an exquisite grey, beside a wide and shining canal. And something great and brilliantly coloured flew across the picture.

3. For a time the Martians – if they were Martians – do not seem to have known of Mr Cave's inspection. Once or twice one would come to peer, and go away very shortly to some other mast, as though the vision was unsatisfactory. During this time Mr Cave was able to watch the proceedings of these winged people without being disturbed by their attentions, and although his report is necessarily vague and fragmentary, it is nevertheless very suggestive. Imagine the impression of humanity a Martian observer would get who, after a difficult process of preparation and with considerable fatigue to the eyes, was able to peer at London from the steeple of St Martin's Church for stretches, at longest, of four minutes at a time. Mr Cave was unable to ascertain if the winged Martians were the same as the Martians who hopped about the causeways and terraces, and if the latter could put on wings at will. He several times saw certain clumsy bipeds, dimly suggestive of apes, white and partially translucent, feeding among certain of the lichenous trees, and once some of these fled before one of the hopping, round-headed Martians. The latter caught one in its tentacles, and then the picture faded suddenly and left Mr Cave most tantalisingly in the dark. On another occasion a vast thing, that Mr Cave thought at first was some gigantic insect, appeared advancing along the causeway beside the canal with extraordinary rapidity. As this drew nearer Mr Cave perceived that it was a mechanism of shining metals and of extraordinary complexity. And then, when he looked again, it had passed out of sight.

blurred: *macchiato*
 causeway: *marciapiede*
 clumsy: *goffo*
 compass: *bussola*
 to hop: *saltare*
 to jar with: *contrastare*
 mast: *antenna radio*
 mossy: *muscoso*
 to peer: *guardare attentamente*
 to soar: *librarsi in aria*
 steeple: *campanile*
 streak: *linea*
 stretches: *una bella distanza*
 to suffice: *bastare*
 tantalisingly: *in modo provocante*
 to writhe: *contorcersi*

4. My own ideas in the matter are practically identical with those of Mr Wace. I believe the crystal on the mast in Mars and the crystal egg of Mr Cave's to be in some physical, but at present quite inexplicable, way en rapport, and we both believe further that the terrestrial

crystal must have been – possibly at some remote date – sent hither from that planet, in order to give the Martians a near view of our affairs. Possibly the fellows to the crystals in the other masts are also on our globe. No theory of hallucination suffices for the facts.

COMPREHENSION

- 1 Read the text and give a title to each extract.
- 2 Read extract 1. What is surprising about the crystal?
- 3 Read extract 2 and write a summary of the description of the place.
- 4 Read extract 3. What type of beings are described there?

ANALYSIS

- 5 The narrator is a third person omniscient narrator. Find examples of his presence in the story.
- 6 What is the author's idea about the crystals?

DISCUSSION

- 7 Discuss.
 1. The two eggs, the one on Mars and the one on the Earth, could be seen as transmitters/receivers. What kind?
 2. Can you imagine a network to communicate with Mars? How would you describe it?
 3. Imagine the egg on Mars is a server and that there are hundreds of eggs on the Earth. Describe the topology of the network.
 4. Imagine and describe a videoconference from the egg on Mars and one on the Earth. What would the first talk be about?
 5. Imagine building a network between the Earth and the other planets of the Solar System and invent an appropriate name. Use the acronyms WAN and GAN as a reference.