

HERBERT GEORGE WELLS AND HIS WORK.

BY E. A. BENNETT.

"The aim and the test and the justification of the scientific process is prophecy."

THE prophet whose "Anticipations" have so profoundly impressed thoughtful people that no less serious a person than Mr. William Archer has proposed in a London newspaper that he should be endowed with an annual income on condition of continuing to prophesy, has hitherto somewhat suffered, in the public estimate, under the disadvantage

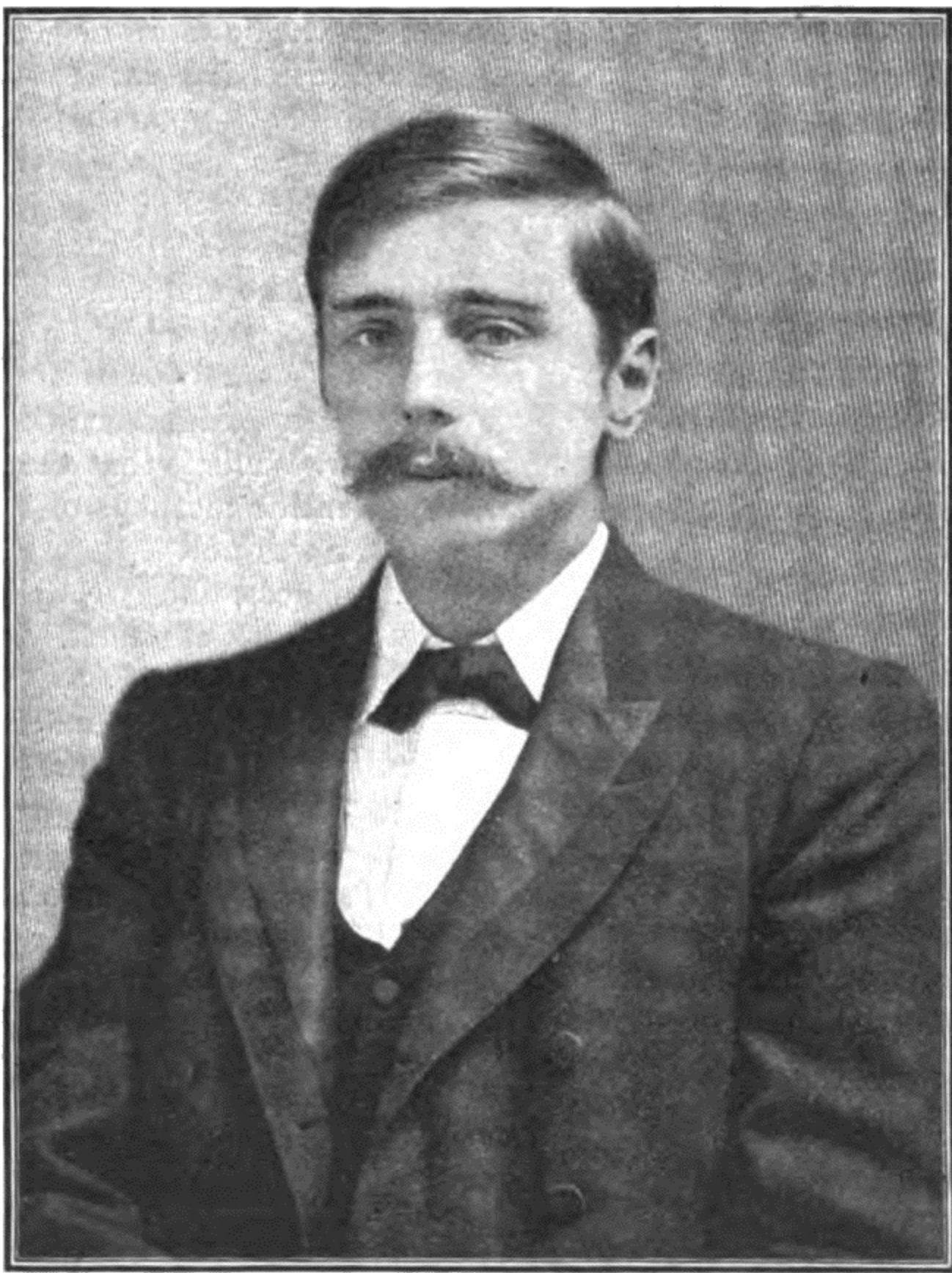
of being wrongly labeled. It is a fact that his work is at least as diverse as that of any living prose-writer. In the seven years since he ascended into the literary firmament he has given forth "scientific romances" such as "The Time Machine," "The Invisible Man," "The Island of Doctor Moreau," "The War of the Worlds," "When the Sleeper Wakes," and "The First

Men in the Moon;" satiric fantasias, such as "The Wonderful Visit" and "The Sea-Lady;" a naturalistic romance, in "The Wheels of Chance;" a realistic novel of modern life, in "Love and Mr. Lewisham;" a couple of volumes of sketches and essays; about half a hundred "strange stories," in all veins, from that

of Poe to that of Guy de Maupassant; and finally the aforesaid "Anticipations," which are as a lamp to the feet of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, and despite all this, if you mention the name of H. G. Wells to the man in the street, he is fairly sure to exclaim, "Oh, yes, the disciple of Jules Verne." Even critics who think

to render the acme of praise call him "the English Jules Verne." And critics who wish to patronize refer to his "pseudo-scientific romances."

Now, I may usefully begin to define Mr. Wells by showing what he is not. He is not the English Jules Verne; he does not belong to the vast Jules Verne school; and his scientific romances are not pseudo-scientific. It conveniently happens that both Jules Verne and



HERBERT GEORGE WELLS'S MOST RECENT PHOTOGRAPH.

Mr. Wells have traveled to the moon, and therefore I will come down to particulars by contrasting the famous "From the Earth to the Moon" and its sequel "Around the Moon," with Mr. Wells's "First Men in the Moon." Jules Verne, by the way, did not invent the moon as a place of celestial resort; Jean Baudoin,

Cyrano de Bergerac, Fontenelle and Edgar Allan Poe had been there before him. In Jules Verne's lunar romance, the note of farcical humor is struck at the commencement and it sounds with increasing mirth to the very end. His city of Baltimore is a farcical city; his Yankees, Impey Barbicane and J. T. Maston, are uproarious puppets of the vaudeville stage; even his Frenchman, Michel Ardan, is a "type" of the broadest. His Gun Club is magnificently farcical. You will remember how, at the notorious mass-meeting of thousands of savants at 21 Union Square, the president's chair, "supported by a carved gun-carriage, was modeled upon the ponderous proportions of a thirty-two-inch mortar. It was pointed at an angle of ninety degrees, and suspended upon trunnions, so that the president could balance himself upon it as upon a rocking-chair, a very agreeable fact in the hot weather;" and how the inkstand was made out of a gun, and order was kept by means of a bell that gave a "report equal to that of a revolver;" and how at the conclusion of his speech the orator, overcome with "emotion, sat down and applied himself to a huge plate of sandwiches." Jules Verne troubles but little about science. He talks with naïve and large satisfaction about "the immutable laws of mechanics," but the immutable laws of mechanics are only dragged into the story here and there to give it a fictitious sanction. We find, for instance, the secretary "rapidly tracing a few algebraical formulæ upon paper, among which n^2 and x^2 frequently appeared." The immutable laws of mechanics are no longer immutable when the projectile, full of air, is opened to emit the dead dog into spatial vacuum and practically no air escapes; nor are they absolutely changeless when the rockets are fired to give impetus by their recoil; nor when a thermometer is hung out on a string to measure an interstellar frostiness of 140° Centigrade below zero. Moreover, Jules Verne's airy argonauts do not achieve the moon; had they done so, they could never have returned to tell the tale. They circle round what the author in a Hugoesque mood calls the Queen of Night; and that detail alone serves to illustrate Jules Verne's propensity to shirk serious scientific problems. In saying this,

my aim is, not to depreciate Jules Verne, but simply to differentiate him from Mr. Wells. "From the Earth to the Moon" and "Around the Moon" are delightful and indeed unique books. They exhibit an extraordinary gift of narrative; a free and fantastic grace of style, and a rich, broad humor which no imitator has ever approached. They are entirely delicious. But they live by their humor and verve and not at all by their illusion of reality or their dexterous handling of the immutable laws of mechanics. They never convince—nothing in them convinces, from the casting of the gun hundreds of feet long, to the returning projectile's final splash which breaks the bowsprit of the "Susquehanna." They do not convince; they divert. When we look back upon the books, it is episodes such as Barbicane's acceptance of the wager, or the wrecking of the Baltimore theater where a foolish manager had put on "Much Ado about Nothing," that we recollect, not the scientific descriptions of the moon.

The great difference between Jules Verne and Mr. Wells is that the latter was trained in scientific methods of thought, while the former was not. Before Jules Verne took to romances, he wrote operatic libretti. Before Mr. Wells took to romances, he was a pupil of Huxley's at the Royal College of Science; he graduated at London University with first-class honors in science; and his first literary production, if I mistake not, was a text-book of biology. Those who prefix "pseudo" to the scientific part of Mr. Wells's novels are not the men of science. On the contrary, one may pleasantly observe the experts of "Nature," a scientific organ of unrivaled authority, discussing the gravitational phenomena of "The First Men in the Moon," with the aid of diagrams, and admitting that Mr. Wells has the law on his side. The qualities of "The First Men in the Moon" are fourfold. There is first the mere human psychology. We begin with two human beings, Mr. Cavor the inventor, and Mr. Bedford the narrator. They are real persons, realistically described, and whether Mr. Cavor stands abashed before the Grand Lunar, or Mr. Bedford floats alone in infinite space, neither of them once loses his individuality or ceases to act or think in a

perfectly credible and convincing way. Secondly, there is the scientific machinery of the narrative, always brilliantly invented, lucidly set forth, and certainly not yet impugned by science. Thirdly, there is the graphic, picturesque side of the affair, as examples of which I may refer to the splendid sunrise on the moon, the terrible lunar night, and that really wonderful instance of close creative thought, the exposition of the air-currents through the caverns of the moon. Fourthly, and to my mind most important, there is what I must call, for lack of a better term, the philosophic quality, that quality which is fundamental in all Mr. Wells's work, and which here is principally active in the invention of the natural history and the social organization of the moon. "Naturally," says Bedford—and we should mark that "naturally," for it discloses the true bent of Mr. Wells's mind—"naturally, as living beings our interest centers far more upon the strange community of lunar insects in which Cavor was living than upon the mere physical condition of their world."

It is impossible not to perceive in Mr. Wells's powerful and sinister projection of the lunar world a deeply satiric comment upon this our earthly epoch of specialization. Among the Selenites, it will be remembered, a race distantly resembling mankind, specialization was carried to the final degree. "Every citizen knows his place. He is born to that place, and the elaborate discipline of training and education and surgery he undergoes fits him at last so completely to it that he has neither ideas nor organs for any purpose beyond it." Some Selenites were all brain, others all limbs. Some could do nothing but remember (living histories and encyclopedias); others could only carry; others could only analogize; still others could only draw. Thus Phi-oo's broken-English description of the artist: "Eat little—drink little—draw. Love draw. No other thing. Hate all who not draw like him. Angry. Hate all who draw like him bet-



MR. WELLS IN HIS STUDY.

ter. Hate most people. Hate all who not think all world for to draw. Angry. M'm. All things mean nothing to him—only draw. He like you. . . . if you understand . . . New thing to draw. Ugly—striking. Eh?" And this more awesome and pathetic passage from Cavor's Marconi message to earth: "I came upon a number of young Selenites confined in jars from which only the fore-limbs protruded, who were being compressed to become machine-minders of a special sort. The extended 'hand' in this highly developed system of technical education is stimulated by irritants and nourished by injection, while the rest of the body is starved. . . . It is quite unreasonable, I know, but such glimpses of the educational methods of these beings affected me disagreeably. I hope, however, that may pass off, and I may be able to see more of this aspect of their wonderful social order. That wretched-looking hand-tentacle sticking out of its jar seemed to have a sort of limp appeal for lost possibilities; it haunts me still, although, of course, it is really in the end a far more humane proceeding than our earthly method of leaving children to grow into human beings and then making machines of them."

Here, in the guise of romance, is a serious criticism of life, and this sober philosophic spirit decked in the picturesque colors of fantasy pervades all the latter part of the book, growing more and more impressive until it reaches its culmination in the sublime apparition of the Grand

Lunar, that calm and supreme pure Intelligence who was so disturbed by Cavor's account of our incredibly ridiculous Earth that he killed the traveler, in order to prevent any organized invasion of the moon from this terrene ball of lust, bloodshed and the Absurd.

Having dissipated, I hope, the Jules Verne theory of Mr. Wells's ancestry, and incidentally examined his latest and best "scientific romance," I may proceed to a more general consideration of his work. In the year 1895, besides "The Time Machine," which made his reputation, Mr. Wells, as if to indicate at once the various lines on which he would develop, published a volume of sketches, a volume of short stories, and that extraordinary fantastic irony, "The Wonderful Visit," which many people regard as the most perfect and delightful thing he has yet accomplished. Touching the last first, it may be said that

"The Wonderful Visit," together with its successor in the same kind, "The Sea-Lady," stands a little apart from the main body of the author's productions. But in the record of the sojourn of the angel in the convention-ridden village, and of the mermaid in the convention-ridden seaside resort, are apparent the moral and imaginative qualities which have enabled Mr. Wells to deal so effectively with themes conceived on a much grander scale. This moral and this imaginative quality are really two sides of one gift—the gift of seeing things afresh, as though no one had ever seen them before, a gift of being able to forget all labels, preconceptions and formulæ devised and invented by other people, of approaching the investigation of phenomena with senses absolutely virginal. It is the peculiar attribute of the artist; it should be, but often is not, the peculiar attribute of the moralist. Mr. Wells the artist and Mr. Wells the moralist (I scarcely know which is paramount) possess it in an abnormal degree. Once the angel arrives in the village, that village ceases to be a village and becomes a concatenation of inexplicable phenomena—inexplicable not only to the angel, but also to the good vicar who endeavors to explain them. To the angel's reiterated "Why? why? why?" there is no answer save the irrational, "Because it has always been so,"

"Because people have agreed that it shall be so," "Because it would never do to alter it." After the angel has perambulated the village, and especially after he has played the violin at Lady Hammergallow's party the reader is overcome with a disconcerting and blinding vision of things as they actually are, and he sees suddenly how much of beauty and joy and sweet reasonableness humanity loses by its habit of clinging to the past instead of reaching forward to the future. The most illuminating part of the book is the vicar's long and poignant reply to the angel's remark: "This life of yours—I'm still in the dark about it. How do you begin?" I will quote briefly from the end of it:—

"And the other people here—how and why is too long a story—have made me a kind of chorus to their lives. They bring their little pink babies to me and I have to say a name and some other things over each new pink baby. And when the children have grown to be youths and maidens, they come again and are confirmed. You will understand that better later. Then before they may join in couples and have little pink babies of their own, they must come again and hear me read out of a book. They would be outcast, and no other maiden would speak to the maiden who had a little pink baby without I had read over her for twenty minutes out of my book. It's a necessary thing, as you will see, odd as it may seem to you. And afterward when they are falling to pieces, I try and persuade them of a strange world in which I scarcely believe myself, where life is altogether different from what they have had—or desire. And in the end, I bury them, and read out of my book to those who will presently follow into the unknown land. I stand at the beginning, and at the zenith, and at the setting of their lives. And on every seventh day, I who am a man myself, I who see no further than they do, talk to them of the life to come—the life of which we know nothing, if such a life there be. And slowly I drop to pieces amidst my prophesying."

"What a strange life!" said the angel.

"Yes," said the vicar, "what a strange life! But the thing that makes it strange to me is new. I had taken it as a matter of course until you came into my life."

I had taken it as a matter of course! That is precisely the attitude of which Mr. Wells's attitude is the antipodes. With him, nothing is of course, and every one who converses with him at any length finds this out first. Under all the wit, the humor, the pathos, the wayward beauty of "The Wonderful Visit" may be perceived this firm and continuous intention—to criticize the social fabric, to demand of each part of it the reason for its existence, and in default of a reply, to laugh it out of existence.

"The Wheels of Chance" is a quasi-satiric romance from which the supernatural element is excluded. Its hero, Mr. Hoop-driver, the draper's assistant who issued forth on a bicycle tour, fell in with a maid, stole a bicycle, and duly returned to his counter, is the best-loved of all Mr. Wells's creations. But I can merely mention the book here as the precursor of the realistic novel, "Love and Mr. Lewisham," the only novel, in the usual meaning of the term, which Mr. Wells has yet written, but which is surely to be followed by others. In it we have the history of a student of science with lofty ideals who got into the toils of that blind force of nature which we call love, and was, in a worldly sense, thereby utterly ruined. The sayings of Mr. Chaffery, that audacious and unmoral spirit who saw things as



MR. WELLS, AGED THIRTEEN.



MR. WELLS IN HIS GARDEN.

they are and gained a livelihood by deceiving the fools who wanted to be deceived, are the memorable utterances in the book. Here, for example, is Mr. Chaffery's recipe for a happy life: "In youth, exer-

cise and learning; in adolescence, ambition, and in early manhood, love—no footlight passion. Then marriage, young and decent, and then children and stout honest work for themselves and for the State in which they live; a life of self-devotion, indeed, and for sunset a decent pride—that is the happy life. . . . the life Natural Selection has been shaping for man since life began. So a man may go happy from the cradle to the grave—at least passably happy. And to do this needs just three things—a sound body, a sound intelligence, and a sound will. . . . A sound will. No other happiness endures. And when all men are wise, all men will seek that life. Fame! Wealth! Art! The Red Indians worship lunatics, and we are still by way of respecting the milder sorts. But I say that all men who do not lead that happy life are knaves and fools." So that only in the worldly sense was Lewisham ruined. At the end of the book, as he stands staring through the window, thinking of his career perforce abandoned, and of the prospect of immediate fatherhood ("the most important career in the world"), his feelings are symbolized for us in an image of really exquisite beauty—"The dwindling light gathered itself together and became a star."

Here, therefore, even in the realistic novel of modern matter-of-fact, we are not allowed to get away from the scientific principles that man is a part of nature, that he is a creature of imperious natural forces, that he is only one link in the chain of eternal evolution.

In the "scientific romances," to which we may now at last come, the principle of evolution and a conception of "man's place in nature" are Mr. Wells's great basic facts.

In his lecture on "The Discovery of the Future," delivered at the Royal Institution on January 24th last, Mr. Wells contrasted two divergent types of mind, distinguishable "chiefly by their attitude toward time and more particularly by the relative importance they attach, and the relative amount of importance they give, to the future of things." The first type of mind, he continued, interprets the things of the present, and gives value to this and denies it to that, entirely with relation to the past. The second type is constructive in habit; it interprets the things of the present, and gives value to this or that, entirely in relation to things designed or foreseen. "While from that former point of view our life is simply to reap the consequences of the past, from this our life is to prepare the future." And he said further: "The former type one might speak of as the legal or submissive type of mind, because the business, the practise and the training of a lawyer dispose him toward it; he of all men must most constantly refer to the law made, the right established, the precedent set, and most consistently ignore or condemn the thing that is only seeking to establish itself. The latter type of mind I might for contrast call the legislative, organizing or masterful type, because it is perpetually attacking and altering the established order of things, perpetually falling away from respect for what the past has given us. *It sees the world as one great workshop and the present is no more than material for the future, for the thing that is destined yet to be.* It is in the active mood of thought, while the former is in the passive; it is the mind of youth, it is the mind more manifest among the Western nations; while the former is the mind of age—the mind of the Oriental. Things have been, says the legal mind, and so we are here. *And the creative mind says, we are here because things have yet to be.*"

The sentences which I have italicized contain the key to Mr. Wells's philosophy of life. He has no use for precedents and conventions. The past may survive only so

long as it can pass the tests of reason. The present must look, never backward at death, but always forward toward life. Among all Mr. Wells's tales I remember but one, "A Story of the Stone Age," which deals with the past. It is the future, it is evolution, it is innovation, which he preaches and will always preach.

He said in that same lecture: "The essential thing in the scientific process is not the collection of facts, but the analysis of facts; facts are the raw material and not the substance of science; the aim and the test and the justification of the scientific process is not a marketable conjuring-trick, but prophecy. Until a scientific theory yields confident forecasts it is unsound and tentative; it is mere theorizing." So science is, ultimately, prophecy—something to help us to shape our ends. And Mr. Wells is a man of science in order, first and foremost, that he may be a prophet and map out the path so that humanity shall avoid détours. And prophecy is really what he has always been at when he has touched science. He may juggle with our ideas of time and space, as in "The Time Machine," "The Plattner Story," "The Crystal Egg," and "The Accelerator;" he may startle or shock us by the artistic presentation of a scientific "conjuring-trick," as in "The Invisible Man" and "The Island of Doctor Moreau;" he may awe us by sheer force of an original imaginative conception, as in "The Star," "Under the Knife," and "The Man Who Could Work Miracles." But his real, preferred business has been to prophesy, to peer into the future. In "The Time Machine," the Time-Traveler goes forward, not into "the dark backward and abysm." Mr. Wells's fancy was youthful in those days, and the Time-Traveler journeyed through a million years or so; he saw a grim and terrible vision of the evolution of the "submerged tenth" and the "upper classes," a world murderously divided against itself, a world in which it seemed that the aspirations and sacrifices and sufferings of mankind had come to nothing at all, had ended in utter moral disaster. He went further and witnessed the more fatigued revolution of a planet occupied by monsters round a sun dying of radiation. He watched what was the apparent final stultification

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of a Supreme Purpose. Then he came back and with a sublime and justifiable audacity remarked to his friends: "No. I cannot expect you to believe it. Take it as a lie—or a prophecy. Say I dreamed it in the workshop. Consider I have been speculating upon the destinies of our race, until I have hatched this fiction. Treat my assertion of its truth as a mere stroke of art to enhance its interest. And taking it as a story, what do you think of it?"

"The War of the Worlds" was not a prophecy, but it was in the nature of a prophecy, a speculative, warning criticism, so far as it described an organization of intelligent beings more advanced than our own. And the same is to be said of "The First Men in the Moon." In "When the Sleeper Wakes" and "A Story of the Days to Come," Mr. Wells returned to prophecy in fiction. But it was a much quieter, soberer, humbler, and an infinitely more useful prophecy than that of "The Time Machine." Instead of dealing with thousands and millions of years, he dealt with a century or so. And in "Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought," he has abandoned the garb of fiction, and he definitely stands forth naked and unashamed as a prophet of the real. My personal opinion is that he will work still more strenuously in this field, and that in the course of a few years, passing down toward the present through a series of futures less and less remote (he has already retreated from thirty millions years hence to a hundred hence), he may develop, still flying all his flags of imagination, fancy, humor, satire and irony, into an actual, prevalent political force. His strongest points are his clear vision and his intellectual honesty and courage; his weakest

point is his instinctive antipathy to any static condition.

And his forecast of the more immediate future, his creed? You may see it set out with surprisingly close texture of detail in "Anticipations;" and in a forthcoming series of essays, possibly more boldly creative in character than "Anticipations," the instant means to the Great End may be shadowed forth as they present themselves to his mind. Suffice it to say here that Mr. Wells firmly believes in universal peace and in the high destiny of nature, "The Time Machine" of seven years ago notwithstanding. "It is not difficult," he has said, "to collect reasons for sup-

posing that humanity will be definitely and consciously organizing itself as a great world-state—a great world-state that will purge itself from much that is mean, much that is bestial, and much that makes for individual dulness and dreariness, grayness and wretchedness in the world of to-day."

"And finally," he added, "there is the reasonable certainty that . . . this earth of ours, tideless and slow-moving, will be dead and frozen, and all that has lived



A PORTRAIT OF MR. WELLS.

upon it will be frozen out and done with. There surely man must end. That of all such nightmares is the most insistently convincing. And yet one doesn't believe it. At least I do not. And I do not believe in these things because I have come to believe in certain other things—in the coherency and purpose in the world and in the greatness of human destiny. Worlds may freeze and suns may perish, but there stirs something within us now that can never die again."

And this by way of postscript: "The most persistently fascinating and the most insoluble question in the whole world is—what is to come *after* man?"

