

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

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16. St Loe Strachey, unsigned review in *Spectator*

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John St Loe Strachey (1860–1927), editor and proprietor of the *Spectator* from 1898 to 1925, and leader of the campaign against Wells's *Ann Veronica* in 1909.

In *The War of the Worlds* Mr. Wells has achieved a very notable success in that special field of fiction which he has chosen for the exercise of his very remarkable gift of narration. As a writer of scientific romances he has never been surpassed. Poe was a man of rare genius, and his art was perhaps greater than Mr. Wells's, though Mr. Wells has a well-cultivated instinct for style. But in Poe there is a certain vein of pedantry which makes much of even his best work tame and mechanical. The logical method which he invented, or at any rate perfected, is too clearly visible in his stories, and appears to cramp his imagination. Besides, in Poe there is always a stifling hothouse feeling which is absent from Mr. Wells's work. Even when Mr. Wells is most awful and most eccentric, there is something human about his characters. The Invisible Man is in many ways like one of Poe's creations; but yet we feel that Poe would have stiffened the invisible man into a splendidly ingenious automaton, not left him a disagreeable, but still possible, medical student. Both Poe and Mr. Wells are, of course, conscious or unconscious followers of Swift, but Mr. Wells keeps nearest to the human side of the author of *Gulliver*. In manner, however, as in scheme and incident, Mr. Wells is singularly

original, and if he suggests any one in externals it is Defoe. There are several passages in *The War of the Worlds* which seem to recall the *History of the Plague*. Nevertheless, we should not be surprised to hear that Mr. Wells had never read Defoe's immortal book. In any case, the resemblance comes, we are certain, not from imitation, but from the parallel action of two very acute and sincere intelligences. Each had to get into something like the same mental attitude towards the things to be related, and hence the two narrations are something akin. We say 'sincere intelligences' advisedly. We feel that in spite of the wildness of Mr. Wells's story it is in no sort of sense a 'fake.' He has not written haphazard, but has imagined, and then followed his imagination with the utmost niceness and sincerity. To this niceness and sincerity Mr. Wells adds an ingenuity and inventiveness in the matter of detail which is beyond praise. Any man can be original if he may be also vague and inexpressive. Mr. Wells when he is most giving wings to his imagination is careful to be concrete and specific. Some sleights of chiaroscuro, some tricks of perspective, some hiding of difficult pieces of drawing with convenient shadows, —these there must be in every picture, but Mr. Wells relies as little as possible on such effects. He is not perpetually telling us that such-and-such things could not be described by mortal pen.

Mr. Wells's main design is most original. As a rule, those who pass beyond the poles and deal with non-terrestrial matters take their readers to the planets or the moon. Mr. Wells does not 'err so greatly' in the art of securing the sympathy of his readers. He brings the awful creatures of another sphere to Woking Junction, and places them, with all their abhorred dexterity, in the most homely and familiar surroundings. A Martian dropped in the centre of Africa would be comparatively endurable. One feels, with the grave-digger in *Hamlet*, that they are all mad and bad and awful there, or, if not, it is no great matter. When the Martians come flying through the vast and dreadful expanses of interplanetary space hid in the fiery womb of their infernal cylinders, and land on a peaceful Surrey common, we come to close quarters at once with the full horror of the earth's invasion. Those who know the valleys of the Wey and the Thames, and to whom Shepperton and Laleham are familiar places, will follow the advance of the Martians upon London with breathless interest. The vividness of the local touches, and the accuracy of the geographical details, enormously enhance the horror of the picture. When everything else is so true and exact, the mind finds it difficult to be always rebelling against the impossible Martians. We shall not attempt here—it would not be fair to Mr. Wells's thrilling book—to tell the story

of the Martian war. We may, however, mention one point of detail. Many readers will be annoyed with Mr. Wells for not having made his Martians rather more human, and so more able to receive our sympathy of comprehension, if not of approbation. A little reflection will, we think, show that this was impossible. This is the age of scientific speculation, and scientific speculation, rightly or wrongly, has declared that if there are living and sentient creatures on Mars they will be very different from men. Mr. Wells, whose knowledge of such speculations is obviously great, has followed the prevailing scientific opinion, and hence his appalling Martian monster—a mere brain surrounded by a kind of brown jelly, with tentacles for hands—a creature which, by relying upon machinery, has been able to dispense with almost everything connected with the body but the brain. Mr. Wells has made his Martians semi-globular and bisexual. Had he, we wonder, in his mind the passage in Plato's *Symposium* which describes how man was once two sexes in one, and had a round body? If he was not relying upon Plato's legend, it is curious to note how the scientific imagination has twice produced a similar result.

In Mr. Wells's romance two things have been done with marvellous power. The first is the imagining of the Martians, their descent upon the earth and their final overthrow. They were terribly difficult figures to bring on and keep on the stage, but the difficulty of managing their exit with a reasonable deference to the decencies of fictional probability was nothing but colossal. Yet Mr. Wells turns this difficulty triumphantly, as our readers will discover for themselves. The second thing which Mr. Wells has done with notable success is his description of the moral effects produced on a great city by the attack of a ruthless enemy. His account of the stampede from London along the great North Road is full of imaginative force.

[Quotes Bk I, ch. 16 'So much as they could see' to "The Martians are coming!"]

That is a most remarkable piece of literary workmanship, and therefore we quote it, though far more sensational is the account of how the Martians turned their heat-ray on their victims, how they fed themselves by sucking into their own veins the blood of the men and women they caught, how they threw the canisters of black powder that blasted half London, and how they died in the end because they were not, like men, the descendants of those who have survived after millions of years of struggle with the bacteria that swarm in air, earth, and water. These, however, we must leave our readers to read about by themselves. That they will read with

intense pleasure and interest we make no sort of doubt, for the book is one of the most readable and most exciting works of imaginative fiction published for many a long day. There is not a dull page in it, and virtually no padding. One reads and reads with an interest so unflagging that it is positively exhausting. *The War of the Worlds* stands, in fact, the final test of fiction. When once one has taken it up, one cannot bear to put it down without a pang. It is one of the books which it is imperatively necessary to sit up and finish. We will add one word of personal comment. Our readers may remember that some three or four months ago we tried to work out, *à propos* of Mr. Wells's book, which was then appearing serially, the possible results on mankind of a Martian invasion. Mr. Wells enters upon a similar inquiry, though on somewhat different lines. And now, before we leave Mr. Wells's book, we will add our one piece of adverse criticism. Why did he cumber his page with such a hopelessly conventional figure as the poor, mouthing, silly curate? A weak-minded curate of this kind is the sort of lay figure that any second-rate novelist might have borrowed out of a fictional costumier's cupboard. Mr. Wells should have been above so poor and strained a device. If it was necessary for him to use a stalking-horse of this kind, why not an editor, a publisher, an author, or an architect? Even a rector would have been a little fresher. One has had so many serio-comic curates in fiction that the mind really refuses to bite upon them.