



The Door in the Wall

As a teenager, H.G. Wells (1866-1946) spent three grim¹ years as an apprentice shop assistant. That meant working thirteen hours a day, and sleeping in a big room with other boys. Luckily he then won a scholarship² which paid for him to re-enter education, and finally he got a BSc degree in zoology from the University of London.

Wells was interested in social reform and technology. He and Jules Verne (who died in 1905) more or less invented modern science fiction. Today Wells is famous mainly for his sci-fi adventure stories. He created both "The Time Machine" and "The Invisible Man", which reappear ... or not ... in hundreds of later stories and films by other writers. Another famous Wells story is "The War of the Worlds".

PART I

Lionel Wallace is dead, and so I am free to tell his story. When he told it to me, three months ago, it seemed to me that he, at least, thought the story was true.

He told it to me in such a simple, direct way that I had to believe him.³ His voice was slow, almost hypnotic.⁴ It was late in the evening, at his house, after

¹ **grim**: Not fun, not comfortable. A grim place is ugly, dirty and depressing; or cold, wet and windy. If somebody looks grim, they look very serious, perhaps because they must do something very difficult or dangerous.

² **a scholarship**: A financial grant, a bursary. Money to pay for school fees, food and accommodation.

³ **believe**: (a) You may **believe** that the Earth is a sphere or is flat; or that there is one God or eleven gods or no god; or that humans evolved (Darwin) or were created (Creationism). We get our **beliefs** from our parents, from friends and the media, and sometimes from logical thought.

(b) You may **believe** that a person is telling you the truth or you may not.

(c) By extension: 'I believe in going for a walk every day' or 'Is it raining?' 'Yes, I believe it is'.

⁴ **hypnotic**: Mesmerising. The idea of **hypnosis** is to make somebody calm and relaxed, so that they don't resist new ideas. Advertisers, theatre magicians and some doctors use it.

dinner. The room was quite silent.¹ There was a fire burning on the hearth², and a single light on the table between us, but the room was dark apart from that. The table-lamp made a bright little world with its own temporary reality.

The next morning, back at my own apartment, I woke up in a different atmosphere,³ one of sunshine and street noise. I lay in bed thinking about what he had said, and I decided that Wallace had told me an imaginative story, to amuse me and himself.

"He told me a mystery story!" I said to myself, and then: "And how well he did it! I didn't know he had so much imagination."

The story was incredible; it was impossible to believe it. But even as I sat in bed with my morning cup of tea I knew that it was, in some way, real for him. I thought perhaps it was a metaphor⁴, an allegory for something else⁵; something he wanted to tell me but found it difficult to speak about.

¹ **quite silent**: Completely silent. With a **gradable adjective** like 'hot' (hot, hotter, hottest, hotter than) 'quite' means 'a bit less than'. So, if 30 degrees Celsius is hot, 25 degrees Celsius is quite hot.

However, 'quite' does something different with **ungradable adjectives** such as 'silent', 'right', 'possible' and 'dead'. These adjectives are ungradable because something either is silent, or right, or possible, or dead - or it isn't. Something can't be '~~more silent~~' or '~~silenter~~' or '~~the silentest~~'. Even so, you can **emphasize** that a thing is silent, by using a word like 'absolutely', 'totally', 'completely' or 'quite'. In this story, we see this with 'quite silent', 'quite sure' and 'quite clear'. They mean 'completely silent', 'completely sure' and 'completely clear'.

² **hearth**: A fireplace in a house. The hearth is the horizontal part, where the fire is. The chimney is the vertical part; it's the tube that takes away the smoke.

³ **atmosphere**: (1) Literally, the air around a planet. (2) By extension, the emotional feeling of a particular place. A happy family home has 'a good atmosphere'. A palace has 'an atmosphere of luxury'. A nice restaurant has 'a welcoming atmosphere'.

⁴ **a metaphor**: Metaphors and similes compare one thing with another. If we say 'the Earth is a blue ball', that's a metaphor. If we say 'the Earth is like a blue ball', that's a simile.

⁵ **an allegory**: If you're interested in techniques used by writers (**literary devices**), an **allegory** seems to talk about one thing while really talking about something else. John Bunyan's *'Pilgrim's Progress'* (1678) is a **religious allegory**; it seems to be an action adventure but is really about the problems of being a Christian and a good man. George Orwell's *'Animal Farm'* (1945) is a **political allegory**. It talks about the humans and animals on an English farm, but it's really about the Russian Revolution and Stalinism (Сталинизм).

I don't think that today. My doubts have gone. I believe again, as I believed that evening three months ago, that Wallace did his very best to tell me the literal truth of his secret.¹ However, I cannot guess whether he had a fantastic dream, or was given an astonishing prize. The reader must decide for himself.

Wallace and I were friends because of our shared interest in the Fabian social movement², but recently he had missed several meetings.³ He seemed to have lost interest. That evening at his house I asked him why. He was silent for a short time, and then suddenly replied, "I have another interest; one I cannot forget."

"I know," he went on, after a pause while he studied his cigar ash, "that I have been careless about the Fabians lately. The fact is ... that something haunts me⁴. It's not a spirit or a ghost,⁵ but there is something that haunts me. It's a strange thing, Redmond. It makes real life seem unreal. It makes me want something else, something different."

Wallace was very much the English gentleman⁶, and it was difficult for him to talk about his emotions, or to discuss serious or beautiful things. "You were at

¹ **the literal truth:** The literal meaning of words is exactly what they say, without any hidden meaning, exaggeration or images. If we say that Britain is '*a precious stone set in the silver sea*', that is not literally true. It's an image; a metaphor. If we say that Britain is an island with an area of 242,000 km² and a cool, wet climate, that is a literal statement.

² **Fabian social movement:** The Fabian Society is a political group with socialist ideals. H.G. Wells was a member.

³ **missed:** If you miss something, you don't get it. If you throw a snowball at your friend but it doesn't touch him, you **missed**. If you are late for your bus, you **miss** your bus. If you explain something to another person but they don't understand, they **miss** your point. If everybody except you gets a chocolate, you **miss out**. If your keys are not where you left them, they are **missing**. If you are sad because your friend is not there, you **miss** them.

⁴ **something haunts me:** A place can be haunted by a ghost (if you believe in ghosts). People can be haunted by a memory that they can't forget.

⁵ **a spirit or a ghost:** These are the same thing, really. There are lots of words for this. General words include ghost, spirit, spectre, phantom, manifestation and spook. Specific words include poltergeist, barrow-wight, fetch, duppy, ghoul, etc.

⁶ **English gentleman:** Ladies and gentlemen went to the right school and had the right accent, manners, attitudes and clothes. You could see them at the opera, a fashionable horse race or a garden party. If you were **not a gentleman**, you could not go to university; you could not become a churchman, lawyer, doctor or military officer; and you could not meet important people at a gentlemen's club or at major social events.

Saint Athelstan's¹ at the same time that I was. Well..."² And he paused. But then he began to tell me his secret. He told me of the thing that was hidden in his life. He was haunted by the memory of a beauty and a happiness that filled his heart with constant wanting; a memory that made all the activities and interest of his actual life³ seem boring and useless.

Now that he is dead, it seems obvious that he spent a lot of his time thinking about something. I have a photograph of him that shows this very clearly. I remember what a woman once said to me about him. She had loved him very much. "Suddenly he loses all interest. He forgets you. You are right there⁴, just in front of him, but he is not interested in you at all. You are nothing to him."

Yet Wallace could show interest. When he wanted to, he could pay the closest attention.⁵ In fact, he was very successful, one of the most successful men in London. I have had an ordinary professional career, but his adult life took him to the heart of British politics. He was already a Member of Parliament, and the newspapers said that he would be in the new government, and probably a minister in the new Cabinet⁶. It was thirty years earlier that we had started school together at St Athelstan's in West Kensington⁷, and he had always found it easy to get better marks⁸ than me in tests. I did well, but he did better.

¹ **Saint Athelstan's**: A fictional school for boys.

² **Well...**: In conversation, the word 'well' at the start of a sentence is like 'so...' or 'hmm...' or 'oh...' or 'now...'. It means *'Listen, because I'm going to tell you the next interesting thing.'*

³ **his actual life**: His real life; the life he lived, in fact.

⁴ **right there**: Nearby and easy to see. (*'Where are my keys?' 'They're right there on the table. Next to your book.'*)

⁵ **pay ... attention**: Really look and listen; to concentrate on something, to focus on something. You have to **pay attention** when you cross a road or study an academic subject. Friends like it when you pay attention to them. Nobody likes it when the tax authorities start to pay attention to them.

⁶ **a minister in the new Cabinet**: In British politics, the Cabinet is the Members of Parliament who are the current Prime Minister's closest political friends. As 'ministers', each is the head of one government department or 'ministry'. (A cabinet with a small c is a piece of furniture with glass doors, for storing alcoholic drinks...)

⁷ **West Kensington**: A residential district of London. Many Kensington streets have trees and big houses.

⁸ **marks**: Scores, grades or percentages in tests and examinations.

The University of Oxford wanted him, and gave him a generous scholarship¹ to go there.

He first told me of the Door in the Wall when we were at St Athelstan's. The second time Wallace talked about it was only a few months before his death. To Wallace, certainly, that door was not a dream or a metaphor. It was a real door leading through a real wall to immortal realities. I am quite sure² of that.

And the Door came into his life early, when he was a little boy, between five and six years old. I remember him talking about it after our dinner at his house. He was thinking, and he talked slowly and seriously. "I remember," he said, "a white wall, and on it a red vine³, a Virginia creeper⁴. The sunshine was amber⁵, and the Virginia creeper was red and crimson against the whiteness of the wall.

"I remember, too, that there were leaves from a chestnut tree on the pavement outside the green door. The leaves were yellow and green, not brown, and not dirty. They must have just fallen from the tree. That must be October. I look out for chestnut leaves every year, and I ought to know. Logically, I must have been about five years and four months old."

He was, he said, quite an advanced little boy. He learned to talk at an abnormally early age, and he was so sensible⁶ and mature that he was given more freedom at the age of five or six than most boys of seven or eight. His mother died when he was very young. His father was a lawyer, and an extremely serious man.⁷ He did not give the boy much attention, but he

¹ **scholarship:** See *scholarship*, above.

² **quite sure:** Absolutely sure. See 'quite silent', above.

³ **vine:** A type of climbing plant ('climber'). For example the plant that produces grapes for wine is a grape vine. A vine can cover a wide area by climbing on walls, trees, etc.

⁴ **Virginia creeper:** A plant, *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*. It's a vine or climber, and its leaves change colour to red or orange in autumn. It's related to the *Vitis* vines that give us grapes and wine.

⁵ **amber:** A dark orange colour. (Also, a jewel made of fossilised tree resin).

⁶ **sensible:** He had common sense; he was practical, he knew what to do, he didn't do stupid or excessive things. (*Sensible* is a 'false friend' in some languages: compare with *sensitive*.)

⁷ **an extremely serious man:** He never laughed, and he did not often smile.

expected great things of him¹. Instead of a mother, Wallace had a nursery governess². I think he found life a little grey and boring. And one day he wandered off³ on his own.

He could not remember what his governess was doing that afternoon, or exactly where he went among the roads and streets of West Kensington. Those memories have gone. But he can clearly remember the white wall and the green door.

He remembers the strange emotion he felt when he first saw that door. He felt an attraction,⁴ a desire to get to the door, and open it, and walk in. And at the same time he had a clear idea that he must not do this; that it was unwise or wrong to open the door. However he knew from the very beginning that the door was not locked, and that he could go in if he chose.

In my imagination, I see the little boy standing there, simultaneously attracted and repelled⁵. It was quite clear in his mind⁶, too (although he was unable to explain why) that his father would be very angry if he went through that door.

Wallace described all these moments of hesitation to me in great detail. He walked past the door and carried on up the road⁷. He had his hands in his

¹ **great things**: Big, intense, impressive things. **Big** and **great** are the same size or intensity, but there's something impressive or even magnificent about great. '*J.S. Bach was a great composer.*' Peter the Great, the Great Wall of China, the Great War.

² **nursery governess**: A private teacher who works with only one or two young children of a rich family. The **nursery** was a living-room for the young children of a rich family, so that they did not make noise or mess in the rest of the house. (See *made a mess of*, below.)

³ **wandered off**: To wander is to walk with no plan or destination. '*I like wandering about in strange old cities.*' It's pronounced WONDA.

⁴ **an attraction**: A pretty girl, a handsome man, a cute kitten, a nice dinner, a glass of champagne, a lake on a hot day, the smell of grass that has just been cut, a comfortable chair, the latest toy - these things are **attractive**; they attract you. These things are unattractive: Bad manners, dirt, bad smells, ugly buildings, etc.

⁵ **repelled**: *Repel*, *repulsion* and *repulsive* are not very common words, but they are the opposites of *attract*, *attraction* and *attractive*. In physics, one magnet can attract or repel another magnet.

⁶ **it was quite clear in his mind**: He knew it; he was sure of it.

⁷ **carried on up the road**: He continued [walking] up the road.

pockets, and was making a childish attempt to whistle¹. He walked past the end of the white wall. At the end, he remembers, there were some dirty, unattractive shops. He remembered one particular shop. It sold materials for plumbers² and decorators, and in the shop window were dusty piles of plumbing pipe, taps and valves, tins of house paint, and pattern-books of wallpaper. He stood pretending to examine these things,³ but passionately desiring the green door.

Then a strong emotion took him. He turned and ran to the door. He pushed it open with his hands and ran straight through it, and let it slam shut⁴ behind him. And so, in a moment, he entered the garden that has haunted his entire life.

It was very difficult for Wallace to tell me what he felt and understood about that place.

Even the air in the garden was special, remarkable.⁵ There was something exhilarating⁶ about it. It gave him a feeling of lightness, and good things happening, and well-being. The air had a quality that made colours in the garden look clean and vivid⁷ and perfect. From the very moment he entered the garden, he was superbly happy. Only someone who is young and joyful can experience that kind of happiness, and then only in rare moments. And everything was beautiful there...

¹ **to whistle:** He made a musical noise by blowing through his lips, to show that he was confident and relaxed (although he wasn't).

² **plumbers:** People who work with water pipes, taps, baths, showers, etc.

³ **pretending:** He wasn't really looking at them, but he wanted people to think he was. To pretend is to say or do something to make another person believe something which isn't true. A lazy worker will **pretend** to be busy if the boss walks past. A football player may **pretend** that another player has hurt him, by falling to the ground and holding his leg. If somebody shouts bad things at you, you may **pretend** not to hear.

⁴ **let it slam shut:** To slam a door shut is to shut it very fast so that it makes a loud 'bang' noise.

⁵ **remarkable:** Interesting, special. The sort of thing you remember later.

⁶ **exhilarating:** Thrilling, invigorating. It made him feel happy, healthy, strong, excited, optimistic and confident. Now there's a good word...

⁷ **vivid:** Vivid colours are bright, clear and intense.