

STAPLEDON

REVIEWS

WELLS



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MR. WELLS CALLS IN THE MARTIANS

By Olaf Stapledon

A book review of "Star Begotten: A Biological Fantasy" by H.G.Wells.
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Recently printed in The London Mercury, this story now appears as a book. With a skill that the present reviewer has good reason to envy, Mr. Wells presents a thoroughly fantastic theme in a seductive and credible manner. The book is short; but Mr. Wells can compress into a phrase what some of us would take pages to describe.

The intriguing and plausible idea that the Martians may be doctoring human germ cells with cosmic rays so as to produce a superior, Martianized kind of man is, of course, the spice, not the nutritive matter of the dish. The main theme is the improvement in human nature itself which this or some other influence might conceivable produce. Martians, cosmic rays, and genes are in the height of fashion. An earlier writer might have secured much the same effect on us with guardian angels, divine grace, and the soul's faculties. We of today are more easily impressed by the physical, of which we think we know something, than by the spiritual, of which we think there is nothing to be known.

The tone of the book is set by the conversation between eminent scientists and others at the Planetarium Club. Lucid and exciting as this is, I detect in myself a faint impulse of irreverence in the presence of these high priests of our modern faith. Does Mr. Wells feel for

them something of the veneration that Kafka's villagers feel for the officials of "The Castle"? The devastating and surely rather unfair exposure of a mere popularizer of science and the entertaining account of a great newspaper proprietor's reaction to the Martian hypothesis is show that Mr. Wells scorns the erring brother no less than the barbarian.

Martianized individuals are said to have hard, clear, insistent minds. They tend toward freedom from superstition and hocus-pocus, freedom also from the temptations of savage self-regard and mass-suggestion. They find themselves perplexedly aloof from common values and feuds. They are neither leftish nor rightish. Alien to their neighbors, these incipient supermen are liable to an acute sense of isolation and inferiority. They do not at first realize that the whole human world is "floating on a raft of rotting ideas."

All this is excellent and very difficult to do convincingly. To my cost I know it. As Mr. Wells deftly displays his vision of a new human type, we feel the hope and tragedy of man's intermittent desire to be more vital than he is. And Mr. Wells can tell us so clearly so much that is involved in being more vital. So much; and yet his adumbration of the more developed human mind tells only part of the truth. Alas! Although, when clerics expound their faith, I fly to line up behind Mr. Wells, I am an erring disciple. For, when he in turn explains, I feel a restless expectation of a something more which is never forthcoming. He is too ready to assume that an idealization of the positivistic, scientific mood, which is mainly a product of the

nineteenth century, really can adequately suggest the essence of the truly adult human mentality. Should we not rather regard it as a mere passing phase of man's adolescence, wholesome in its hunger for objectivity and its outgrowing of an infantile and debased religiosity, but extravagant in its self-assurance, its incapacity for contemplation, its feverish activity, its frightened rejection of all that still defeats scientific analysis, in fact its dehumanized humanism? The raft is perhaps more rotten than Mr. Wells thinks.

In Mary, the Martianized and "fey" wife of Joseph Davis, we are indeed given in a few masterly touches a slight but vivid impression of a creature bewildered but of a superior order, capable of seeing things more penetratingly and comprehensively than our kind, and also more generously. It is rather in the attempt to give a more definite description of the Martianized mind that the lack appears.

Another point. Davis, the successful writer and propagator of the old romantic values, presents the reader with a problem. When at last he tears up his manuscript, realizing that the Martians are in the right, and that his life's work has been misconceived, Mary playfully suggests that he himself is one of the elect. Immediately he believes her. But was she not merely comforting him? Does Mr. Wells mean Davis to be really one of the star-begotten? If his nature included anything of the true Martian fibre, how could he, even with his unfavorable upbringing, have repressed so completely and for so long all that was ostensibly Martian in him? His was far from a hard, clear, insistent mind. Doubtless his clod was disturbed by a spark, but this is true of most men.