

# A DREAM OF ARMAGEDDON

By H. G. Wells

Illustrated by Ben Cohen



THE man with the white face entered the carriage at Rugby. He moved slowly in spite of the urgency of the porter, and even while he was still on the platform I noted how ill he seemed. He dropped over into the corner against me with a sigh, made an incomplete attempt to arrange his traveling shawl, and became motionless, with his eyes staring vacantly. Presently he was moved by a sense of my observation, looked up at me, and put out a spiritless hand for his newspaper. Then he glanced again in my direction.

I feigned to read. I feared I had unwittingly embarrassed him, and in a moment I was surprised to find him speaking.

"I beg your pardon?" said I.

"That book," he repeated, pointing a lean finger, "is about dreams."

"Obviously," I answered, for it was Fortnum-Roscoe's "Dream States," and the title was on the cover.

He hung silent for a space, as if he sought words. "Yes," he said at last, "but they tell you nothing."

I did not catch his meaning for a second.

"They don't know," he added.

I looked a little more attentively at his face.

"There are dreams," he said, "and dreams."

That sort of proposition I never dispute.

"I suppose—" he hesitated. "Do you ever dream? I mean vividly?"

"I dream very little," I answered. "I doubt if I have three vivid dreams in a year."

"Ah!" he said, and seemed for a moment to collect his thoughts.

"Your dreams don't mix with your memories?" he asked abruptly. "You don't find yourself in doubt; did this happen, or did it not?"

"Hardly ever. Except for just a momentary hesitation now and then. I suppose few people do."

"Does he say—?" he indicated the book.

"Says it happens at times and gives the usual explanation about intensity of impression and the like to account for its not happening as a rule. I suppose you know something of these theories—?"

"Very little—except that they are wrong."

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HIS emaciated hand played with the strap of the window for a time. I prepared to resume reading, and that seemed to precipitate his next remark. He leaned forward, almost as though he would touch me.

"Isn't there something called consecutive dreaming—that goes on night after night?"

"I believe there is. There are cases given in most books on mental trouble."

"Mental trouble! Yes. I dare say there are. It's the right place for them. But what I mean—" He looked at his bony knuckles. "Is that sort of thing always dreaming? Is it dreaming? Or is it something else? Mightn't it be something else?"

I should have snubbed his persistent conversation but for the drawn anxiety of his face. I remember now the look of his faded eyes and the lid redstained—perhaps you know that look.

"I'm not arguing about a matter of opinion," he said. "The thing's killing me."

"Dreams?"

"If you call them dreams. Night after night. Vivid—vivid—this" (he indicated the landscape that went streaming by the window) "seems unreal in comparison! I can scarcely remember

THERE are dreams and dreams, but here is a story of a dream, told by a master writer of mystery, that surely is a marvel.

who I am, what business I am on \* \* \*

He paused. "Even now—"

"The dream is always the same—do you mean?" I asked.

"It's over."

"You mean?"

"I died."

"Died?"

"Smashed and killed, and now, so much of me as that dream was, is dead. Dead forever. I dreamed I was another man, you know, living in a different part of the world and in a different time. I dream that night after night. Night after night I woke into that other life. Fresh scenes and fresh happenings—until I came upon the last—"

"When you died?"

"When I died."

"And since then?"

"No," he said. "Thank God! That was the end of the dream."

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IT WAS clear I was in for this dream. And after all I had an hour before me, the light was fading fast, and Fortnum-Roscoe has a dreary way with him. "Living in a different time," I said; "do you mean in some different age?"

"Yes."

"Past?"

"No, to come—to come."

"The year 3000, for example?"

"I don't know what year it was. I did when I was asleep, when I was dreaming, that is, but not now—not now that I am awake. There's a lot of things I have forgotten since I woke out of these dreams, though I knew them at the time when I was—I suppose I was dreaming. They called the year differently from our way of calling the year. \* \* \* What did they call it?" He put his hand to his forehead. "No," said he, "I forget."

He sat smiling weakly. For a moment I feared he did not mean to tell me his dream. As a rule I hate people who tell their dreams, but this struck me differently. I proffered assistance even. "It began—" I suggested.

"It was vivid from the first. I seemed to wake up in it suddenly. And it is curious that in these dreams I am speaking of I never remembered this life I am living now. It seemed that the dream life was enough while it lasted. Perhaps— But I will tell you how I find myself when I do my best to recall it all. I don't remember anything clearly until I found myself sitting in a sort of loggia looking out over the sea. I had been dozing, and suddenly I woke up—fresh and vivid; not a bit dreamlike—because the girl had stopped fanning me."

"The girl?"

"Yes, the girl. You must not interrupt or you will put me out."

He stopped abruptly. "You won't think I'm mad?" he said.

"No," I answered; "you've been dreaming. Tell me your dream."

"I woke up, I say, because the girl had stopped fanning me. I was not surprised to find myself there or anything of that sort, you understand. I did not feel I had fallen into it suddenly. I simply took it up at that point. Whatever memory I had of this life, this nineteenth century life, faded as I woke, vanished like a dream. I knew all about myself, knew that my name was no longer Cooper but Hedon, and all about my position in the world. I've forgotten a lot since I woke—there's a want of connection—but

it was all quite clear and matter of fact then."

He hesitated again, gripping the window strap, putting his face forward and looking up at me appealingly.

"This seems bosh to you?"

"No, no!" I cried. "Go on. Tell me what the loggia was like."

"It was not really a loggia. I don't know what to call it. It faced south. It was small. It was all in shadow except the semi-circle above the balcony that showed the sky and sea and the corner where the girl stood. I was on a couch—it was a metal couch with light striped cushions—and the girl was leaning over the balcony with her back to me. The light of the sunrise fell on her ear and cheek. Her pretty white neck and the little curls that nestled there, and her white shoulder were in the sun, and all the grace of her body was in the cool blue shadow. She was dressed—how can I describe it? It was easy and flowing. And altogether there she stood, so that it came to me how beautiful and desirable she was, as though I had never seen her before. And when at last I sighed and raised myself upon my arm she turned her face to me—"

He stopped.

"I have lived three-and-fifty years in this world. I have mother, sister, friends, wife and daughters—all their faces, the play of their faces, I know. But the face of this girl—it is much more real to me. I can bring it back to my memory so that I can see it again—I could draw it or paint it. And after all—"

He stopped—but I said nothing.

"The face of a dream—the face of a dream. She was beautiful. Not that beauty which is terrible, cold, and worshipful, like the beauty of a saint; nor that beauty that stirs fierce passions; but a sort of radiation, sweet lips that softened into smiles, and grave gray eyes. And she moved gracefully; she seemed to have part with all pleasant and gracious things—"

He stopped, and his face was downcast and hidden. Then he looked up at me and went on, making no further attempt to disguise his absolute belief in the reality of his story.

"You see, I had thrown up my plans and ambitions; thrown up all I had ever worked for or desired for her sake. I had been a master man away there in the North, with influence and property and a great reputation, but none of it had seemed worth having beside her. I had come to the place, this city of sunny pleasures, with her, and left all those things to wreck and ruin just to save a remnant at least of my life. While I had been in love with her before I knew that she had any care for me, before that I imagined that she would dare—that we should dare—all my life had seemed vain and hollow, dust and ashes. It was dust and ashes. Night after night and through the long days I had longed and desired—my soul had beaten against the thing forbidden!"

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BUT it is impossible for one man to tell another just these things. It's emotional, it's a tint, a light that comes and goes. Only while it's there everything changes, everything. The thing is I came away and left them in their crisis to do what they could."

"Left whom?" I asked, puzzled.

"The people up in the North there."

You see—in this dream, anyhow—I had been a big man, the sort of man men come to trust in, to group themselves about. Millions of men who had never seen me were ready to do things and risk things because of their confidence in me. I had been playing that game for years, that big, laborious game, that vague, monstrous political game amidst intrigues and betrayals, speech and agitation. It was a vast, weltering world, and at last I had a sort of leadership against the gang—you know it was called the gang—a sort of compromise of scoundrelly projects and base ambitions and vast public emotional stupidities and catchwords—the gang that kept the world noisy and blind year by year, and all the while that it was drifting, drifting toward infinite disaster. But I can't expect you to understand the shades and complications of the year—the year something or other ahead. I had it all—down to the smallest details—in my dreams. I suppose I had been dreaming of it before I awoke, and the fading outline of some queer new development I had imagined still hung about me as I rubbed my eyes. It was some grubby affair that made me thank God for the sunlight. I sat up on the couch and remained looking at the woman and rejoicing that I had come away out of all that tumult and folly and violence before it was too late. After all, I thought, this is life—love and beauty, desire and delight, are they not worth all those dismal struggles for vague, gigantic ends? And I blamed myself for having ever sought to be a leader when I might have given my days to love. But then, thought I, if I had not spent my early days sternly and austere, I might have wasted myself upon vain and worthless women, and at the thought all my being went out in love and tenderness to my dear mistress, my dear lady who had come at last and compelled me—compelled me by her invisible charm for me—to lay that life aside.

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YOU are worth it," I said, speaking without intending her to hear; "you are worth it, my dearest one; worth pride and praise and all things. Love! to have you is worth all together." And at the murmur of my voice she turned about.

"Come and see," she cried—I can hear her now—come and see the sunrise upon Monte Solaro."

"I remember how I sprang to my feet and joined her at the balcony. She put a white hand upon my shoulder and pointed toward great masses of limestone, flushing, as it were, into life. I looked. But first I noted the sunlight on her face caressing the lines of her cheeks and neck. How can I describe to you the scene we had before us? We were at Capri—"

"I have been there," I said. "I have clambered up Monte Solaro and drunk Vero Capri—muddy stuff like cider—at the summit."

"Ah!" said the man with the white face; "then perhaps you can tell me—you will know if this indeed was Capri. For in this life I have never been there. Let me describe it. We were in a little room, one of the vast multitudes of little rooms, very cool and sunny, hollowed out by the limestone of a sort of cape, very high above the sea. The whole island, you know, was one enormous hotel, complex beyond explaining, and on the other side there were miles of floating hotels, and huge floating stages to which the flying machines came. They called it a pleasure city. Of course there was none of that in your time—rather, I should say, is none of that now. Of course. Now!—yes."

"Well, this room of ours was at the extremity of the cape, so that one could see east and west. Eastward was a great cliff—a thousand feet high, perhaps—coldly gray except for one bright edge of