

Scientific Romance - short story by Kevin J Anderson

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Late after dark on a chill November night, young Wells followed T. H. Huxley up to the labyrinthine rooftop. The air felt damp, tinged with a clammy mist, yet the sky overhead was dark and clear and sparkling with stars

The meteors would begin falling soon

The minarets and gables of London's Normal School of Science provided nooks, crannies, gutters and eaves where students could hold secret meetings, perhaps rendezvous with young girls from the poorer sections of South Kensington. Wells doubted, though, that any of his classmates would climb to the sprawling rooftop for the same purpose as his teacher and mentor led him now

Huxley's creaking bones and aching limbs forced the old man to move slowly along the precarious shingles. Wells knew better than to offer the professor any assistance. Huxley finally found a spot against a gable and eased himself down. Leaning backward, he propped his head up and stared into the depths of the universe

"Is this your first meteor shower, Herbert?" Huxley asked. "The Leonids are a good place to start. We should see about twenty per hour." Wells, at only eighteen and much more limber, struggled to find his own comfortable observation place. "I've seen shooting stars before, sir," he said, "but I've never actually ... studied them." Huxley gave a wheezing laugh. His voice sounded strange to Wells, a private conversational tone instead of the forceful oratory for which he had become famous across England. "From what I can see, young man, you study every facet of life with those quick and darting eyes of yours." Wells blushed, then ran a hand across his face to hide his embarrassment. His unkempt dark hair fell over his forehead, and his mustache showed gaps where the whiskers hadn't yet filled in enough

He fidgeted, working himself into an awkward squat, holding onto a gutter for balance. Huxley intended to stay out here for hours, but the conversation interested Wells more than his personal comfort. Ideas made mankind superior to other creatures ... and superior men had superior ideas

The flash in his peripheral vision took him completely by surprise. "There!" he shouted, gesturing so rapidly that he nearly lost his precarious balance on the angled roof. A streak of brilliant white light shot overhead then evaporated, so transient it seemed barely an afterimage on his eyes

"The first meteor of the night," Huxley said with a smile, "and you spotted it, Wells. I'm proud of you. But of course, your eyesight is much better than mine." "But your eyes have seen more things, sir," Wells said, then hated the reverential tone he had let slip

"Don't flatter me," Huxley warned. The old man's wit and intellect were as bright as the sun, but his personality remained acerbic and abrasive. Wells would tolerate any number of rebukes, though, for the insights the professor had given him during his biology lectures

Even now, Huxley fell comfortably into the role of teacher. "Make note of the meteorites we see this evening, and you will be able to envision their radiant point in the constellation Leo." Wells settled back to continue watching. Bright in the western ecliptic, the ruddy point of Mars hung like a baleful eye, not twinkling, though the other stars around it glittered and flickered

He shivered from the chill in the air, then tapped his foot, always moving, trying to get warm. Due to his severe financial situation, Wells was underweight and scrawny ... even cadaverous, if one were to believe his roommate and friend, A. V. Jennings. On Tuesdays, the day before weekly pay for the scholars, Wells occasionally could not afford lunch, and Jennings would take him out to fill up on beefsteak and beer so that they could return replenished to the workbench in Huxley's laboratory

Wells's wardrobe was meagre, consisting of grubby dark suits and worn celluloid shirt collars. His thin jacket was insufficient against the chill of the November evening, but he had no desire to go back inside the school building

A second meteor appeared overhead like a line drawn with a pen of fire, eerie in its total silence. "Another!" Around them the city of London made its own nighttime noises. Horsecarts and black cabs clopped quietly by, while prostitutes flounced into dim alleys or waited under the gas streetlamps. Across the park, in the boarding house at Westbourne Grove where he and Jennings shared a room, Wells knew the other residents would be engaged in their nightly carousing, brawls, singing and drinking. Here, high above it all, though, he enjoyed the peace

Within moments a third meteor passed overhead, far from the trivial human concerns around

him. This shooting star was larger and louder than the others, sputtering. Mentally tracing the fiery line back to its origin, Wells saw that the meteor radiated from a point in the sky not far from Mars itself, almost as if the red planet were launching them like sparks from a grinding wheel

"Do you ever imagine, Professor Huxley, sir," he said as an intriguing idea formed in his mind, "that perhaps these flaming meteors are signals of a kind, even ships that have crossed the gulf of space?" Wells had had many outrageous ideas since the age of seven, and he often spoke his speculations aloud, sometimes to the entertainment of others, sometimes to their annoyance

Huxley shifted position, looking over at his student with keen interest. "Ships?" His eyes held a bold challenge, as did his tone. "And from whence would they come, Wells?" Wells rose to the occasion. "Why not ... Mars, for instance?" He indicated the orange-red pinpoint of the planet. "According to theory, as the solar system cooled, each planet became hospitable to life in relation to its distance from the Sun. On Mars, therefore, intelligent life could have begun to evolve long before any such spark occurred on Earth." At the mention of evolution, Huxley perked up--just as Wells had known he would. The professor had spent his life as a proponent of Darwinism, had debated buffoons and ill-educated orators in so many forums that Huxley became infamous as 'Darwin's Bulldog.' Another shooting star passed overhead, as if to emphasize Wells's point

"Martians," Huxley said with a wry smile. "Interesting. And what do you suppose a Martian would look like?" Wells folded one leg over the other, in spite of his precarious rooftop position, and restrained himself from answering instantly. Huxley did not suffer foolish or glib answers. "I would suppose that since the Martians are a much more ancient race, they would have minds immeasurably superior to our own. Their bodies would be composed almost entirely of brain." Two more faint Leonid meteors danced overhead unnoticed. Wells uncrossed and recrossed his legs

"And what would such beings look like?" Wells frowned, letting his thoughts flow. "Natural selection would ultimately shape a superior being into a creature with a huge head and eyes. He would have delicate hands, tentacles perhaps, for manipulating tools--but his mentality would be his greatest tool." "An interesting exercise, Wells. You have quite an imagination." Huxley leaned forward from his cramped position against the gable, scooting across the roof tiles so that he could speak in a low, hoarse voice to his protégé. "But why would Martians want to come to our green Earth? What is their motive?" Wells was ready for that one. "Mars is a dry planet, cold and drained of resources. Our world is younger, fresher, more vibrant--filled with all the things they have lost over the course of their evolution. Perhaps even now the Martians are regarding this Earth with envious eyes. They might even be drawing up plans for invasion." As a boy, Wells had studied military history, staging mock battles in the park and observing the movements of one historical army against another. But an interplanetary war was beyond his comprehension

"A war of the worlds?" Huxley actually chuckled at this. "And you believe that such superior minds as you propose would engage in an exercise as trivial as military conquest? You must not

consider them so evolved after all." Wells kept his thoughts to himself, for he had suddenly realized that perhaps Thomas H. Huxley was a bit naive himself

In his life, Wells had seen the gross divisions of the upper and lower classes and how each fought amongst the others for dominance. His hard-working, sweet mother had sent him off to be apprenticed to a draper, where he had labored as a virtual slave. After escaping that fate through his own calculated incompetence, Wells had lived with his mother where she was the head domestic servant in a large manor, and she had commanded the workers beneath her. His angry father had once been a gardener, but for years had found no better employment than occasional cricket playing...

The hierarchy remained, no matter what their social standing, powerful and powerless. It proved to Wells's satisfaction the Darwinian basis that all humans had been predators at some time in the past

Wells answered his professor carefully. "If the Martians are a dying race," he said, "it would be survival of the fittest. The Martians would see Earth ripe for conquest, humans as inferior cattle." "Survival of the fittest--I'll concede that point, Wells," Huxley said. "We must hope the Martians do not invade." He shifted back to his former position, where he watched for further Leonids. The two sat in silence, looking into the clear sky. Wells shivered, partially from the cold, partially from his own thoughts

They watched the stars fall as the red eye of Mars blinked balefully at them

The following day, in the bustling laboratory section of Huxley's biology course, Wells felt feverish. He wondered if he had caught a chill from the previous night's vigil

Nevertheless, the sounds of clacking beakers, the smell of old chemical experiments, and the chatter of students engaged his mind. He soon became totally absorbed in the setting up of microscopes and experimental apparatus for the morning's exercise

One of Huxley's assistants--a demonstrator who delivered occasional lectures when Huxley himself was too ill to speak--prepared the laboratory activity. As if he were a prize French chef, he presented a pot in which he had prepared an infusion of local weeds and pond water. The resulting murky concoction was infested with numerous fascinating microbes

Wells's workbench partner, A. V. Jennings, was the son of a doctor. He received a small stipend, which allowed him much greater security than Wells, though they both lived in an unpleasant boarding house an intellectual world away from the high atmosphere of Huxley's lecture hall

Now, while Jennings set up their shared microscope on a narrow table against the windows, Wells went forward with his microscope slide to receive a drop of the precious infusion, as if it were some scientific communion. He carefully slid a cover slip over the beer-colored droplet and returned to where his partner had finished preparing the apparatus

Under watery light shining through a veil of gray clouds, Wells focused and refocused the microscope. Jennings had a sketchpad, as did Wells, to record their observations. Wells feverishly sketched the alien-looking creatures he observed: protozoans of all types, alien shapes with whipping flagella, hairlike cilia vibrating in a blur ... blobby amoebas, various strains of algae

As Wells scrutinized the exotic creatures swarming and multiplying in the tiny universe of a drop of water, he felt like a titan. His looming presence stared through an eyepiece to observe the tiny struggles of pond microorganisms...

Wells realized that the other students had stopped their conversations and stood at attention, as if a royal presence had entered the room. Professor T. H. Huxley had deigned to visit his laboratory this morning

The intimidating, acerbic old man strode around the workbenches where his students diligently studied the infinitesimal animals they found on their microscope slides. Huxley nodded approvingly, made quiet sounds but little conversation, and moved from station to station

When the great man came to where Wells stood proudly beside his microscope, Huxley said in a gruff voice, "Morning, Wells." The professor bent over to study their slide, adjusted the focus ever so slightly as if it were his due. "Lovely euglena you have here under the light." He made another noncommittal sound, then moved on to the other students

Wells stood looking after his mentor, disappointed. Huxley had made no mention of their shared experience with the meteor shower, their imaginative conversation. He had come here for no purpose other than to scrutinize his insignificant students ... in the same way that Wells and Jennings had been studying the microbes

His cheeks flushed, and the cool feverish sweat swept over him. He extended his imagination further, wondering if other powerful beings might even now be scrutinizing Earth in the same manner, curious about the buzzing and swarming colony of London

The hair on the back of his neck prickled, as if he could sense the probing eyes watching him from afar

He was startled to find Jennings regarding him oddly. "You don't look at all well, Herbert," he said. Jennings reached over with practiced ease and touched Wells's forehead. "In fact you're burning up." He frowned. "I think you should go home and rest before this grows more serious." The fever caught hold with nightmarish strength, and Wells fell into a labyrinth of delirium fostered by the powerful resources of his own imagination

He saw meteors falling and falling, huge cylinders accompanied by green fire that blazed across the sky. The interplanetary ships crashed to Earth, pummeling England like quail shot

In the great impact craters where they settled and cooled, the cylinders opened up to reveal that they were warships from the red planet, carrying hoards of invading Martians--hugely developed brains with tentacled limbs that had evolved under a lower gravity

Their vast mentalities had turned toward the conquest of Earth. The most insignificant of these extraordinarily developed creatures had a military intellect far superior to the combined genius of Napoleon and Alexander the Great

Using their whiplike appendages, the Martians built war machines, clanking metal things on tall stiltlike legs that surpassed even the imagination of Leonardo Da Vinci

The clanking machines strode about the English landscape like industrial contraptions he had seen among the dark factories of the dirty towns where he had worked as a draper's apprentice. But these machines were equipped with weapons, powerful heat rays that burned everything in sight

Hot like Wells's fever

And overhead the meteors continued falling, falling...

When the fever finally broke, Wells awoke in his narrow, lumpy bed to find Jennings tending him, laying a cool rag over his forehead. A patch of bright, hot sunlight spilled through the window, warming his skin

Wells croaked, his voice uncooperative, but he spoke quickly, not wanting his roommate to get the best of him with a first witticism. "What now Jennings?" he said. "Are you practicing to become a doctor like your father?" Jennings smiled. His eyes were red-rimmed, as if he hadn't gotten much sleep. "You've had quite a time of it, Herbert. Been sick for days, feverish, haven't eaten a thing but a bit of broth I managed to acquire for you." "Worst of all, you've missed three of my lectures," said another voice

Weakly, Wells managed to prop himself up enough to see another man standing in the small, stuffy room. T. H. Huxley himself

"Since you are one of only three students who has so far proved worthy of a first-class passing grade," the old professor said, "I wanted to see why you were so rude as to forsake my class." Huxley's voice was stern but subdued, as if he were restraining his normal booming tone only with great difficulty

"Not to worry, sir," Wells said. "I'm sure Jennings took good notes." It embarrassed him that Huxley had to see how lowly his student lived. The room in South Kensington had a crowded, squalid appearance, with too many brutish noises that carried through the walls as other boarders came in drunk at all hours. The air was cold--no one had brought up coal for some time--and smelled rank from unemptied chamberpots sitting out in the hall

The professor maintained a mock stern expression. "I should have been quite disappointed had you died, Wells. Though you are only eighteen, I see great potential in you." Huxley paced the room as if searching for something significant to say. Wells waited for him. "Quite humbling, isn't it?" the professor finally said. "A superior creature such as yourself, highly evolved and possessed of a grand intellect--laid low by something as crude and insignificant as an Earthly germ." Wells gave a wan smile in response. "I'm sorry, sir. I shall try to prove my evolutionary superiority henceforth." Huxley sighed reticently and paused at the door, ready to leave. "You may wish to know, Wells, that I have decided this will be my last semester teaching. I've spent far too many years trying to show everyone the obvious truth, and I shall give it up and retire out of sheer exhaustion." Distraught, Wells cried, "But, sir, there's so much more we can learn from you!"

"I have wasted far too much time and energy in debates with fools over the correctness of Darwinism. I've earned myself a rest. But I will need someone to carry on, eventually." Huxley opened the door, adjusted his hat, and frowned back at his sick student. "With your imagination, I think you can make something of yourself, Wells," he said. "Don't disappoint me." Then Huxley left, heading out to far more pleasant surroundings on the other side of the park

Wells leaned back into his bed while Jennings stared at him in awe. "That was quite a benediction, Herbert." Wells lay back and closed his eyes, dizzy with residual weakness from the fever. But his mind was already whirling and spinning, filled with a thousand thoughts

"I think I'll rest for a bit, Jennings," he said

After all, he had to restore his health before he could begin his life's work

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