

## INSPIRATION

By Ben Bova

\* \* \* \*

HE WAS AS CLOSE TO DESPAIR as only a lad of seventeen can be. "But you heard what the professor said," he moaned. "It is all finished. There is nothing left to do."

The lad spoke in German, of course. I had to translate it for Mr. Wells. Wells shook his head. "I fail to see why such splendid news should upset the boy so."

I said to the youngster, "Our British friend says you should not lose hope. Perhaps the professor is mistaken."

"Mistaken? How could that be? He is a famous man! A nobleman! A baron!"

I had to smile. The lad's stubborn disdain for authority figures would become world-famous one day. But it was not in evidence this summer afternoon in A.D. eighteen ninety-six.

We were sitting in a sidewalk cafe with a magnificent view of the Danube and the city of Linz. Delicious odors of cooking sausages and bakery pastries waited from the kitchen inside. Despite the splendid warm sunshine, though, I felt chilled and weak, drained of what little strength I had remaining.

"Where is that blasted waitress?" Wells grumbled. "We've been here half an hour, at the least."

"Why not just lean back and enjoy the afternoon, sir?" I suggested tiredly. "This is the best view in all the area."

Herbert George Wells was not a patient man. He had just scored a minor success in Britain with his first novel and had decided to treat himself to a vacation in Austria. He came to that decision under my influence, of course, but he did not yet realize that. At age twenty-nine, he had a lean, hungry look to him that would mellow only gradually with the coming years of prestige and prosperity.

Albert was round-faced and plumpish; still had his baby fat on him, although he had started a mustache as most teenaged boys did in those days. It was a thin, scraggly black wisp, nowhere near the full white brash it would become. If all went well with my mission.

It had taken me an enormous amount of maneuvering to get Wells and this teenager to the same place at the same time. The effort had nearly exhausted all my energies. Young Albert had come to see Prof. Thomson with his own eyes, of

course. Wells had been more difficult; he had wanted to see Salzburg, the birthplace of Mozart. I had taken him instead to Linz, with a thousand assurances that he would find the trip worthwhile.

He complained endlessly about Linz, the city's lack of beauty, the sour smell of its narrow streets, the discomfort of our hotel, the dearth of restaurants where one could get decent food — by which he meant burnt mutton. Not even the city's justly famous Linzertorte pleased him. "Not as good as a decent trifle," he grouched. "Not as good by half."

I, of course, knew several versions of Linz that were even less pleasing including one in which the city was nothing more than charred radioactive rubble and the Danube so contaminated that it glowed at night all the way down to the Black Sea. I shuddered at that vision and tried to concentrate on the task at hand.

It had almost required physical force to get Wells to take a walk across the Danube on the ancient stone bridge and up the Postlingberg to this little sidewalk cafe. He had huffed with anger when we had started out from our hotel at the city's central square, then soon was puffing with exertion as we toiled up the steep hill. I was breathless from the climb also. In later years a tram would make the ascent, but on this particular afternoon we had been obliged to walk.

He had been mildly surprised to see the teenager trudging up the precipitous street just a few steps ahead of us. Recognizing that unruly crop of dark hair from the audience at Thomson's lecture that morning, Wells had graciously invited Albert to join us for a drink.

"We deserve a beer or two after this blasted climb," he said, eyeing me unhappily.

Panting from the climb, I translated to Albert, "Mr. Wells . . . invites you . . . to have a refreshment . . . with us."

The youngster was pitifully grateful, although he would order nothing stronger than tea. It was obvious that Thomson's lecture had shattered him badly. So now we sat on uncomfortable cast iron chairs and waited—they for the drinks they had ordered, me for the inevitable. I let the warm sunshine soak into me and hoped it would rebuild at least some of my strength.

The view was little short of breathtaking: the brooding castle across the river, the Danube itself streaming smoothly and actually blue as it glittered in the sunlight, the lakes beyond the city and the blue-white snow peaks of the Austrian Alps hovering in the distance like ghostly petals of some immense unworldly flower.

But Wells complained, "That has to be the ugliest castle I have ever seen."

“What did the gentleman say?” Albert asked.

“He is stricken by the sight of the Emperor Friedrich’s castle,” I answered sweetly.

“Ah. Yes, it has a certain grandeur to it, doesn’t it?”

Wells had all the impatience of a frustrated journalist. “Where is that damnable waitress? Where is our beer?”

“I’ll find the waitress,” I said, rising uncertainly from my iron-hard chair. As his ostensible tour guide, I had to remain in character for a while longer, no matter how tired I felt. But then I saw what I had been waiting for.

“Look!” I pointed down the steep street. “Here comes the professor himself!”

William Thomson, First Baron Kelvin of Largs, was striding up the pavement with much more bounce and energy than any of us had shown. He was seventy-one, his silver-gray hair thinner than his impressive gray beard, lean almost to the point of looking frail. Yet he climbed the ascent that had made my heart thunder in my ears as if he were strolling amiably across some campus quadrangle.

Wells shot to his feet and leaned across the iron rail of the cafe. “Good afternoon, your Lordship.” For a moment I thought he was going to tug at his forelock.

Kelvin squinted at him. “You were in my audience this morning were you not?”

“Yes, m’lud. Permit me to introduce myself: I am H.G. Wells.”

“Ah. You’re a physicist?”

“A writer, sir.”

“Journalist?”

“Formerly. Now I am a novelist.”

“Really? How keen.”

Young Albert and I had also risen to our feet. Wells introduced us properly and invited Kelvin to join us.

“Although I must say,” Wells murmured as Kelvin came ‘round the railing and

took the empty chair at our table, “that the service here leaves quite a bit to be desired.”

“Oh, you have to know how to deal with the Teutonic temperament,” said Kelvin jovially as we all sat down. He banged the flat of his hand on the table so hard it made us all jump. “Service!” he bellowed. “Service here!”

Miraculously, the waitress appeared from the doorway and trod stubbornly to our table. She looked very unhappy; sullen, in fact. Sallow pouting face with brooding brown eyes and downturned mouth. She pushed back a lock of hair that had strayed across her forehead.

“We’ve been waiting for our beer,” Wells said to her.

“And now this gentleman has joined us —”

“Permit me, sir,” I said. It was my job, after all. In German I asked her to bring us three beers and the tea that Albert had ordered and to do it quickly.

She looked the four of us over as if we were smugglers or criminals of some sort, her eyes lingering briefly on Albert, then turned without a word or even a nod and went back inside the cafe.

I stole a glance at Albert. His eyes were riveted on Kelvin, his lips parted as if he wanted to speak but could not work up the nerve. He ran a hand nervously through his thick mop of hair. Kelvin seemed perfectly at ease, smiling affably, his hands laced across his stomach just below his beard; he was the man of authority, acknowledged by the world as the leading scientific figure of his generation.

“Can it be really true?” Albert blurted at last. “Have we learned everything of physics that can be learned?”

He spoke in German, of course, the only language he knew. I immediately translated for him, exactly as he asked his question.

Once he understood what Albert was asking, Kelvin nodded his gray old head sagely. “Yes, yes. The young men in the laboratories today are putting the final dots over the i’s, the final crossings of the t’s. We’ve just about finished physics; we know at last all there is to be known.”

Albert looked crushed.

Kelvin did not need a translator to understand the youngster’s emotion. “If you are thinking of a career in physics, young man, then I heartily advise you to think again. By the time you complete your education there will be nothing left for you to do.”

“Nothing?” Wells asked as I translated. “Nothing at all?”

“Oh, add a few decimal places here and there, I suppose. Tidy up a bit, that sort of thing.”

Albert had failed his admission test to the Federal Polytechnic in Zurich. He had never been a particularly good student. My goal was to get him to apply again to the Polytechnic and pass the exams.

Visibly screwing up his courage, Albert asked, “But what about the work of Roentgen?”

Once I had translated, Kelvin knit his brows. “Roentgen? Oh, you mean that report about mysterious rays that go through solid walls? X-rays, is it?”

Albert nodded eagerly.

“Stuff and nonsense!” snapped the old man. “Absolute bosh. He may impress a few medical men who know little of science, but his x-rays do not exist. Impossible! German daydreaming.”

Albert looked at me with his whole life trembling in his piteous eyes. I interpreted:

“The professor fears that x-rays may be illusory, although he does not as yet have enough evidence to decide, one way or the other.”

Albert’s face lit up. “Then there is hope! We have not discovered everything as yet!”

I was thinking about how to translate that for Kelvin when Wells ran out of patience. “Where is that blasted waitress?”

I was grateful for the interruption. “I will find her, sir.”

Dragging myself up from the table, I left the three of them, Wells and Kelvin chatting amiably while Albert swiveled his head back and forth, understanding not a word. Every joint in my body ached and I knew that there was nothing anyone in this world could do to help me. The cafe was dark inside, and smelled of stale beer. The waitress was standing at the bar, speaking rapidly, angrily, to the stout barkeep in a low venomous tone. The barkeep was polishing glasses with the end of his apron; he looked grim and, once he noticed me, embarrassed.

Three seidels of beer stood on a round tray next to her, with a single glass of tea. The beers were getting warm and flat, the tea cooling, while she blistered the

bartender's ears.

I interrupted her vicious monologue. "The gentlemen want their drinks," I said in German.

She whirled on me, her eyes furious. "The gentlemen may have their beers when they get rid of that infernal Jew!"

Taken aback somewhat, I glanced at the barkeep. He turned away from me.

"No use asking him to do it," the waitress hissed. "We do not serve Jews here. I do not serve Jews and neither will he!"

The cafe was almost empty this late in the afternoon. In the dim shadows I could make out only a pair of elderly gentlemen quietly smoking their pipes and a foursome, apparently two married couples, drinking beer. A six-year-old boy knelt at the far end of the bar, laboriously scrubbing the wooden floor.

"If it's too much trouble for you," I said, and started to reach for the tray.

She clutched at my outstretched arm. "No! No Jews will be served here! Never!"

I could have brushed her off. If my strength had not been drained away I could have broken every bone in her body and the barkeep's, too. But I was nearing the end of my tether and I knew it.

"Very well," I said softly. "I will take only the beers."

She glowered at me for a moment, then let her hand drop away. I removed the glass of tea from the tray and left it on the bar. Then I carried the beers out into the warm afternoon sunshine.

As I set the tray on our table, Wells asked, "They have no tea?"

Albert knew better. "They refuse to serve Jews," he guessed. His voice was flat, unemotional, neither surprised nor saddened.

I nodded as I said in English, "Yes, they refuse to serve Jews."

"You're Jewish?" Kelvin asked, reaching for his beer.

The teenager did not need a translation. He replied, "I was born in Germany. I am now a citizen of Switzerland. I have no religion. But, yes, I am a Jew."

Sitting next to him, I offered him my beer.

“No, no,” he said with a sorrowful little smile. “It would merely upset them further. I think perhaps I should leave.”

“Not quite yet,” I said. “I have something that I want to show you.” I reached into the inner pocket of my jacket and pulled out the thick sheaf of paper I had been carrying with me since I had started out on this mission. I noticed that my hand trembled slightly.

“What is it?” Albert asked.

I made a little bow of my head in Wells’s direction. “This is my translation of Mr. Wells’s excellent story, *The Time Machine*.”

Wells looked surprised, Albert curious. Kelvin smacked his lips and put his half-drained seidel down.

“Time machine?” asked young Albert.

“What’s he talking about?” Kelvin asked.

I explained, “I have taken the liberty of translating Mr. Wells’s story about a time machine, in the hope of attracting a German publisher.” Wells said, “You never told me —”

But Kelvin asked, “Time machine? What on earth would a time machine be?”

Wells forced an embarrassed, self-deprecating little smile. “It is merely the subject of a tale I have written, m’lud: a machine that can travel through time. Into the past, you know. Or the, uh, future.”

Kelvin fixed him with a beady gaze. “Travel into the past or the future?”

“It is fiction, of course,” Wells said apologetically.

“Of course.”

Albert seemed fascinated. “But how could a machine travel through time? How do you explain it?”

Looking thoroughly uncomfortable under Kelvin’s wilting eye, Wells said hesitantly, “Well, if you consider time as a dimension —”

“A dimension ?” asked Kelvin.

“Rather like the three dimensions of space.”

“Time as a fourth dimension?”

“Yes. Rather.”

Albert nodded eagerly as I translated. “Time as a dimension, yes! Whenever we move through space we move through time as well, do we not ? Space and time! Four dimensions, all bound together!”

Kelvin mumbled something indecipherable and reached for his half-finished beer.

“And one could travel through this dimension?” Albert asked. “Into the past or the future?”

“Utter bilge,” Kelvin muttered, slamming his emptied seidel on the table. “Quite impossible.”

“It is merely fiction,” said Wells, almost whining. “Only an idea I toyed with in order to —”

“Fiction. Of course,” said Kelvin, with great finality. Quite abruptly, he pushed himself to his feet. “I’m afraid I must be going. Thank you for the beer.”

He left us sitting there and started back down the street, his face flushed. From the way his beard moved I could see that he was muttering to himself.

“I’m afraid we’ve offended him,” said Wells.

“But how could he become angry over an idea?” Albert wondered. The thought seemed to stun him. “Why should a new idea infuriate a man of science ?”

The waitress bustled across the patio to our table. “When is this Jew leaving?” she hissed at me, eyes blazing with fury. “I won’t have him stinking up our cafe any longer!”

Obviously shaken, but with as much dignity as a seventeen-year-old could muster, Albert rose to his feet. “I will leave, madame. I have imposed on your so-gracious hospitality long enough.”

“Wait,” I said, grabbing at his jacket sleeve. “Take this with you. Read it. I think you will enjoy it.”

He smiled at me, but I could see the sadness that would haunt his eyes forever. “Thank you, sir. You have been most kind to me.”



He took the manuscript and left us. I saw him already reading it as he walked slowly down the street toward the bridge back to Linz proper. I hoped he would not trip and break his neck as he ambled down the steep street, his nose stuck in the manuscript.

The waitress watched him too. “Filthy Jew. They’re everywhere! They get themselves into everything.”

“That will be quite enough from you,” I said as sternly as I could manage.

She glared at me and headed back for the bar.

Wells looked more puzzled than annoyed, even after I explained what had happened.

“It’s their country, after all,” he said, with a shrug of his narrow shoulders. “If they don’t want to mingle with Jews there’s not much we can do about it, is there?”

I took a sip of my warm flat beer, not trusting myself to come up with a properly polite response. There was only one timeline in which Albert lived long enough to make an effect on the world. There were dozens where he languished in obscurity or was gassed in one of the death camps.

Wells’s expression turned curious. “I didn’t know you had translated my story.”

“To see if perhaps a German publisher would be interested in it,” I lied.

“But you gave the manuscript to that Jewish fellow.”

“I have another copy of the translation.” “You do? Why would you —”

My time was almost up, I knew. I had a powerful urge to end the charade. “That young Jewish fellow might change the world, you know.”

Wells laughed.

“I mean it,” I said. “You think that your story is merely a piece of fiction. Let me tell you, it is much more than that.”

“Really?”

“Time travel will become possible one day.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” But I could see the sudden astonishment in his eyes. And the memory. It was I who had suggested the idea of time travel to him. We had

discussed it for months back when he had been working for the newspapers. I had kept the idea in the forefront of his imagination until he finally sat down and dashed off his novel.

I hunched closer to him, leaned my elbows wearily on the table. “Suppose Kelvin is wrong? Suppose there is much more to physics than he suspects?”

“How could that be?” Wells asked.

“That lad is reading your story. It will open his eyes to new vistas, new possibilities.”

Wells cast a suspicious glance at me. “You’re pulling my leg.”

I forced a smile. “Not altogether. You would do well to pay attention to what the scientists discover over the coming years. You could build a career writing about it. You could become known as a prophet if you play your cards properly.”

His face took on the strangest expression I had ever seen: he did not want to believe me and yet he did; he was suspicious, curious, doubtful and yearning — all at the same time. Above everything else he was ambitious; thirsting for fame. Like every writer, he wanted to have the world acknowledge his genius.

I told him as much as I dared. As the afternoon drifted on and the shadows lengthened, as the sun sank behind the distant mountains and the warmth of day slowly gave way to an uneasy deepening chill, I gave him carefully veiled hints of the future. A future. The one I wanted him to promote.

Wells could have no conception of the realities of time travel, of course. There was no frame of reference in his tidy nineteenth-century English mind of the infinite branchings of the future. He was incapable of imagining the horrors that lay in store. How could he be? Time branches endlessly and only a few, a precious handful of those branches manage to avoid utter disaster.

Could I show him his beloved London obliterated by fusion bombs? Or the entire northern hemisphere of Earth depopulated by man-made plagues? Or a devastated world turned to a savagery that made his Morlocks seem compassionate?

Could I explain to him the energies involved in time travel or the damage they did to the human body? The fact that time travelers were volunteers sent on suicide missions, desperately trying to preserve a timeline that saved at least a portion of the human race? The best future I could offer him was a twentieth century tortured by world wars and genocide. That was the best I could do.

So all I did was hint, as gently and subtly as I could, trying to guide him

toward that best of all possible futures, horrible though it would seem to him. I could neither control nor coerce anyone; all I could do was to offer a bit of guidance. Until the radiation dose from my trip through time finally killed me.

Wells was happily oblivious to my pain. He did not even notice the perspiration that beaded my brow despite the chilling breeze that heralded nightfall.

“You appear to be telling me,” he said at last, “that my writings will have some sort of positive effect on the world.”

“They already have,” I replied, with a genuine smile.

His brows rose.

“That teenaged lad is reading your story. Your concept of time as a dimension has already started his fertile mind working.”

“That young student?”

“Will change the world,” I said. “For the better.”

“Really?”

“Really,” I said, trying to sound confident. I knew there were still a thousand pitfalls in young Albert’s path. And I would not live long enough to help him past them. Perhaps others would, but there were no guarantees.

I knew that if Albert did not reach his full potential, if he were turned away by the university again or murdered in the coming holocaust, the future I was attempting to preserve would disappear in a global catastrophe that could end the human race forever. My task was to save as much of humanity as I could.

I had accomplished a feeble first step in saving some of humankind, but only a first step. Albert was reading the time-machine tale and starting to think that Kelvin was blind to the real world. But there was so much more to do. So very much more.

We sat there in the deepening shadows of the approaching twilight, Wells and I, each of us wrapped in our own thoughts about the future. Despite his best English self-control, Wells was smiling contentedly. He saw a future in which he would be hailed as a prophet. I hoped it would work out that way. It was an immense task that I had undertaken. I felt tired, gloomy, daunted by the immensity of it all. Worst of all, I would never know if I succeeded or not.

Then the waitress bustled over to our table. “Well, have you finished? Or are you going to stay here all night?”

Even without a translation Wells understood her tone. "Let's go," he said, scraping his chair across the flagstones.

I pushed myself to my feet and threw a few coins on the table. The waitress scooped them up immediately and called into the cafe, "Come here and scrub down this table! At once!"

The six-year-old boy came trudging across the patio, lugging the heavy wooden pail of water. He stumbled and almost dropped it; water sloshed onto his mother's legs. She grabbed him by the ear and lifted him nearly off his feet. A faint tortured squeak issued from the boy's gritted teeth.

"Be quiet and your do work properly," she told her son, her voice murderously low. "If I let your father know how lazy you are . . ."

The six-year-old's eyes went wide with terror as his mother let her threat dangle in the air between them.

"Scrub that table good, Adolf," his mother told him. "Get rid of that damned Jew's stink."

I looked down at the boy. His eyes were burning with shame and rage and hatred. Save as much of the human race as you can, I told myself. But it was already too late to save him.

"Are you coming?" Wells called to me.

"Yes," I said, tears in my eyes. "It's getting dark, isn't it?"

\* \* \* \*

Ben Bova returns to our pages with a wonderful story about the way that ideas work. Set in Germany around the turn of the century, "Inspiration" brings together a number of famous historical characters, including a well known scientist and an equally well known science fiction writer

Ben has been writing a bout science and scientists since junior high school when he first visited the Fels Planetarium in Philadelphia. He has gone on to make a career of that interest as both an award winning science fiction writer and an award winning editor. His most recent novel, Mars, has earned great critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. His next novel, Death Dream, will appear in a few months from Bantam Books.