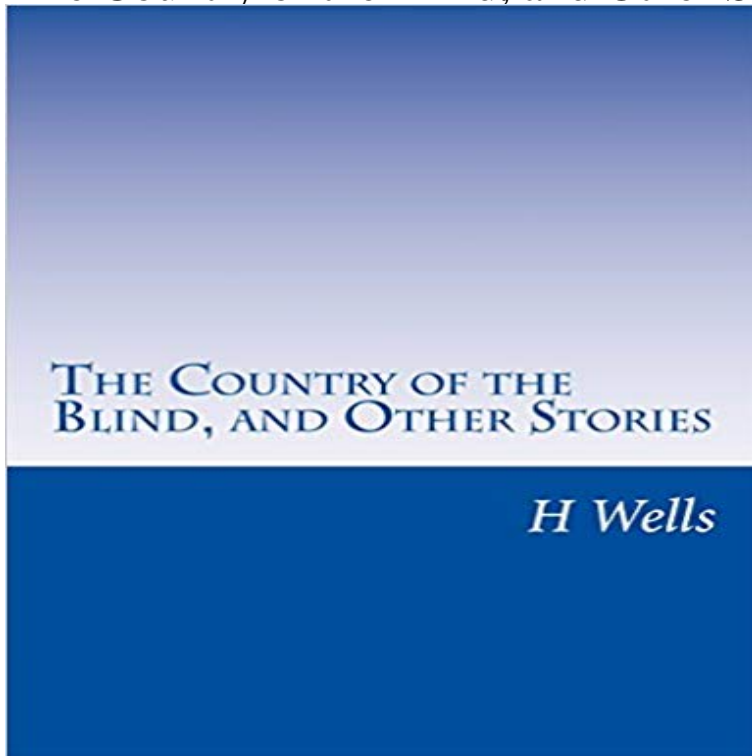


The Country of the Blind, and Other Stories



The enterprise of Messrs. T. Nelson & Sons and the friendly accommodation of Messrs. Macmillan render possible this collection in one cover of all the short stories by me that I care for any one to read again. Except for the two series of linked incidents that make up the bulk of the book called Tales of Space and Time, no short story of mine of the slightest merit is excluded from this volume. Many of very questionable merit find a place; it is an inclusive and not an exclusive gathering. And the task of selection and revision brings home to me with something of the effect of discovery that I was once an industrious writer of short stories, and that I am no longer anything of the kind. I have not written one now for quite a long time, and in the past five or six years I have made scarcely one a year. The bulk of the fifty or sixty tales from which this present three-and-thirty have been chosen dates from the last century. This edition is more definitive than I supposed when first I arranged for it. In the presence of so conclusive an ebb and cessation an almost obituary manner seems justifiable. I find it a little difficult to disentangle the causes that have restricted the flow of these inventions. It has happened, I remark, to others as well as to myself, and in spite of the kindest encouragement to continue from editors and readers. There was a time when life bubbled with short stories; they were always coming to the surface of my mind, and it is no deliberate change of will that has thus restricted my production. It is rather, I think, a diversion of attention to more sustained and more exacting forms. It was my friend Mr. C.L. Hind who set that spring going. He urged me to write short stories for the Pall Mall Budget, and persuaded me by his simple and buoyant conviction that I could do what he desired. There existed at the time only the little sketch, The Jilting of Jane, included in this volume at least, that is the only tolerable

fragment of fiction I find surviving from my pre-Lewis-Hind period. But I set myself, so encouraged, to the experiment of inventing moving and interesting things that could be given vividly in the little space of eight or ten such pages as this, and for a time I found it a very entertaining pursuit indeed. Mr. Hinds indicating finger had shown me an amusing possibility of the mind. I found that, taking almost anything as a starting-point and letting my thoughts play about it, there would presently come out of the darkness, in a manner quite inexplicable, some absurd or vivid little incident more or less relevant to that initial nucleus. Little men in canoes upon sunlit oceans would come floating out of nothingness, incubating the eggs of prehistoric monsters unawares; violent conflicts would break out amidst the flower-beds of suburban gardens; I would discover I was peering into remote and mysterious worlds ruled by an order logical indeed but other than our common sanity.

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