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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Henry Nietzsche Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac Crane
Leslie Stockton Vatsyayana Verne
Burroughs Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Darwin Thoreau Twain Plato
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The War of the Wenuses

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BOOK I.

The Coming of the Wenuses.

The Coming of the Wenuses.

I.

"JUST BEFORE THE BATTLE, MOTHER."

No one would have believed in the first years of the twentieth century that men and modistes on this planet were being watched by intelligences greater than woman's and yet as ambitious as her own. With infinite complacency maids and matrons went to and fro over London, serene in the assurance of their empire over man. It is possible that the mysticetus does the same. Not one of them gave a thought to Venus as a source of danger, or thought of it only to dismiss the idea of active rivalry upon it as impossible or improbable. Yet across the gulf of space astral women, with eyes that are to the eyes of English women as diamonds are to boot-buttons, astral women, with hearts vast and warm and sympathetic, were regarding Butterick's with envy, Peter Robinson's with jealousy, and Whiteley's with insatiable yearning, and slowly and surely maturing their plans for a grand inter-stellar campaign.

The pale pink planet Venus, as I need hardly inform the sober reader, revolves round the sun at a mean distance of [character: Venus sigil] vermillion miles. More than that, as has been proved by the recent observations of Puits of Paris, its orbit is steadily but surely advancing sunward. That is to say, it is rapidly becoming too hot for clothes to be worn at all; and this, to the Wenuses, was so alarming a prospect that the immediate problem of life became the discovery of new quarters notable for a gentler climate and more copious fashions. The last stage of struggle-for-dress, which is to us still remote, had embellished their charms, heightened their heels and enlarged their hearts. Moreover, the population of Venus consisted exclusively of Invisible Men—and the Wenuses were about tired of it. Let us, however, not judge them too harshly. Remember what ruthless havoc our own species has wrought, not only on animals such as the Moa and the Maori, but upon its own inferior races such as the Wanishing Lady and the Dodo Bensonii.

The Wenuses seem to have calculated their descent with quite unfeminine accuracy. Had our instruments permitted it, we might have witnessed their preparations. Similarly pigs, had they wings, might fly. Men like Quellen of Dresden watched the pale pink planet—it is odd, by the way, that for countless centuries Venus has been the star of Eve—evening by evening growing alternately paler and pinker than a literary agent, but failed to interpret the extraordinary phenomena, resembling a series of powder puffs, which he observed issuing from the cardiac penumbra on the night of April 1st, 1902. At the same time a great light was remarked by Idos of Yokohama and Pegadiadis of Athens.

The storm burst upon us six weeks later, about the time of the summer sales. As Venus approached opposition, Dr. Jelli of Guava set the wires of the astronomical exchange palpitating with the intelligence of a huge explosion of laughing gas moving risibly towards the earth. He compared it to a colossal cosmic cachinnation. And, in the light of subsequent events, the justice of the comparison will commend itself to all but the most sober readers.

Had it not been for my chance meeting with Swears, the eminent astronomer and objurgationist, this book would never have been written. He asked me down to our basement, which he rents from me as an observatory, and in spite of all that has happened since I still remember our wigil very distinctly. (I spell it with a "w" from an inordinate affection for that letter.) Swears moved about, invisible but painfully audible to my naked ear. The night was very warm, and I was very thirsty. As I gazed through the syphon, the little star seemed alternately to expand and contract, and finally to assume a sort of dual skirt, but that was simply because my eye was tired. I remember how I sat under the table with patches of green and crimson swimming before my eyes. Grotesque and foolish as this may seem to the sober reader, it is absolutely true.

Swears watched till one, and then he gave it up. He was full of speculations about the condition of Venus. Swears' language was extremely sultry.

"The chances against anything lady-like on Venus," he said, "are a million to one."

Even *Pearson's Weekly* woke up to the disturbance at last, and Mrs. Lynn Linton contributed an article entitled "What Women Might Do" to the *Queen*. A paper called *Punch*, if I remember the name aright, made a pun on the subject, which was partially intelligible with the aid of italics and the laryngoscope. For my own part, I was too much occupied in teaching my wife to ride a Bantam, and too busy upon a series of papers in *Nature* on the turpitude of the classical professoriate of the University of London, to give my undivided attention to the impending disaster. I cannot divide things easily; I am an indivisible man. But one night I went for a bicycle ride with my wife. She *was* a Bantam of delight, I can tell you, but she rode very badly. It was starlight, and I was attempting to explain the joke in the paper called, if I recollect aright, *Punch*. It was an extraordinarily sultry night, and I told her the names of all the stars she saw as she fell off her machine. She had a good bulk of falls. There were lights in the upper windows of the houses as the people went to bed. Grotesque and foolish as this will seem to the sober reader, it is absolutely true. Coming home, a party of bean-feasters from Wimbledon, Wormwood Scrubs, or Woking passed us, singing and playing concertinas. It all seemed so safe and tranquil. But the Wenuses were even then on their milky way.

II.

THE FALLING STAR.

Then came the night of the first star. It was seen early in the morning rushing over Winchester; leaving a gentle frou-frou behind it. Trelawny, of the Wells' Observatory, the greatest authority on Meteoric Crinolines, watched it anxiously. Winymann, the publisher, who sprang to fame by the publication of *The War of the Worlds*, saw it from his office window, and at once telegraphed to me: "Materials for new book in the air." That was the first hint I received of the wonderful wisit.

I lived in those days at 181a Campden Hill Gardens. It is the house opposite the third lamp-post on the right as you walk east. It was of brick and slate, with a party-wall, and two spikes were wanting to the iron railings. When the telegram came I was sitting in my study writing a discussion on the atomic theory of Krelli of Balmoral. I at once changed the Woking jacket in which I was writing for evening dress — which wanted, I remember, a button — and hastened to the Park. I did not tell my wife anything about it. I did not care to have her with me. In all such adventures I find her more useful as a sentimental figure in the background — I, of course, allow no sentiment in the foreground — than an active participant.

On the way I met Swears, returning from breakfast with our mutual friend, Professor Heat Ray Lankester — they had had Lee-Metford sardines and Cairns marmalade, he told me, — and we sought the meteor together.

Find it we did in Kensington Gardens. An enormous dimple had been made by the impact of the projectile, which lay almost buried in the earth. Two or three trees, broken by its fall, sprawled on the turf. Among this *débris* was the missile; resembling nothing so much as a huge crinoline. At the moment we reached the spot P.C. A581 was ordering it off; and Henry Pearson, aged 28 (no fixed abode),

and Martha Griffin, aged 54, of Maybury Tenements, were circulating among the crowd offering matches for sale. They have nothing to do with this story, but their names and addresses make for verisimilitude; or at least, I hope so. In case they do not, let me add that Mary Griffin wore a blue peignoir which had seen better days, and Herbert Pearson's matches struck everywhere except on the box.

With a mental flash we linked the Crinoline with the powder puffs on Venus. Approaching it more nearly, we heard a hissing noise within, such as is made by an ostler, or Mr. Daimler grooming his motor car.

"Good heavens!" said Swears, "there's a horse in it. Can't you hear? He must be half-roasted."

So saying he rushed off, fraught with pity, to inform the Secretary of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; while I hurried away to tell Pendriver the journalist, proposing in my own mind, I recollect, that he should give me half the profits on the article.

Pendriver the journalist, so called to distinguish him from Hoop-driver the cyclist, was working in his garden. He does the horticultural column for one of the large dailies.

"You've read about the disturbances in Venus?" I cried.

"What!" said Pendriver. He is as deaf as the *Post*, the paper he writes for.

"You've read about Venus?" I asked again.

"No," he said, "I've never been to Venice."

"Venus!" I bawled, "Venus!"

"Yes," said Pendriver, "Venus. What about it?"

"Why," I said, "there are people from Venus in Kensington Gardens."

"Venus in Kensington Gardens!" he replied. "No, it's not Venus; it's the Queen."

I began to get angry.

"Not the statue," I shouted. "Wisitors from Wenus. Make copy. Come and see! Copy! Copy!"

The word "copy" galvanised him, and he came, spade and all. We quickly crossed the Park once more. Pendriver lives to the west of it, in Strathmore Gardens, and has a special permit from his landlord to dig. We did not, for sufficient reasons, converse much. Many persons were now hastening towards the strange object. Among them I noticed Jubal Gregg the butcher (who fortunately did not observe me—we owed him a trifle of eighteen shillings, and had since taken to Canterbury lamb from the Colonial Meat Stores), and a jobbing gardener, whom I had not recently paid. I forget his name, but he was lame in the left leg: a ruddy man.

Quite a crowd surrounded the Crinoline when we arrived, and in addition to the match-vendors already mentioned, there was now Giuseppe Mandolini, from Leather Lane, with an accordion and a monkey. Monkeys are of course forbidden in Kensington Gardens, and how he eluded the police I cannot imagine. Most of the people were staring quietly at the Crinoline, totally unaware of its significance. Scientific knowledge has not progressed at Kensington by the same leaps and bounds as at Woking. Extra-terrestrial had less meaning for them than extra-special.

We found Swears hard at work keeping the crowd from touching the Crinoline. With him was a tall, red-haired man, who I afterwards learnt was Lee-Bigge, the Secretary of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He had a summons and several officials with him, and was standing on the Crinoline, bellowing directions in a clear, rich voice, occasionally impeded by emotion, like an ox with a hiccough.

As soon as Swears saw me, he asked me to bring a policeman to assist him to keep back the crowd; and I went away, proud to be so honoured, to find one. I was unsuccessful. P.C. A581 had gone off duty; but another constable, I was told, had been seen, an hour or so earlier, asleep against the railings,—it was a baker's boy who told me, just back from delivering muffins in St. Mary Abbot's Terrace,—and had since wandered in the direction of the Albert Hall. I followed, but could not see him in any of the areas, and therefore re-

turned slowly by way of Queen's Gate, Cromwell Road, Earl's Court Road, and Kensington High Street, hoping to meet another; and as it was then about noon, I entered an A.B.C. and had half a pork-pie and a bucket of Dr. Jaeger's Vi-cocolate. I remember the circumstance distinctly, because feeling rather hungry and wishing to vary the *menu*, I asked the girl for half a veal-and-ham pie and she brought me the balance of the original pasty; and when I remonstrated, she said that her directors recognised no essential difference between veal-and-ham and pork.

III.

THE CRINOLINE EXPANDS.

When I returned to the Gardens the sun was at his zenith. The crowd around the Crinoline had increased and some sort of a struggle seemed to be going on. As I drew near I heard Lee-Bigge's voice:

"Keep back! keep back!"

A boy came running towards me.

"It's a-movin'," he said to me as he passed; "a-blowin' and a-blowin' out. Now we shan't be long!" Passing on, I saw that it was indeed expanding. The ribs were more distended and the covering more tightly stretched. The hissing had ceased and a creaking noise had taken its place. There was evidently great pressure within. Once something resembling an *en tout cas* was thrust through the top, making what was presumably an attempt to dislodge Lee-Bigge, and then suddenly the Crinoline burst, revealing a vision of ultra-mundane loveliness.

I shall not attempt exhaustively to describe the indescribable. It is enough to assure the sober reader that, grotesque and foolish as it may seem, this is absolutely true, and to record that after the glimpse I had of the Wenuses emerging from the Crinoline in which they had come to the earth from their planet, a kind of fascination paralysed my actions. All other men in the crowd seemed to be similarly affected. We were battle-grounds of love and curiosity. For the Wenuses were gorgeous: that is the sum of the matter.

Those who have never seen a living Venus (there is a specimen in fairly good spirits in the Natural History Museum) can scarcely imagine the strange beauty of their appearance. The peculiar W-shaped mouth, the incessant nictitation of the sinister eyelid, the naughty little twinkle in the eye itself, the glistening glory of the arms, each terminating in a fleshy digitated Handling Machine re-

sembling more than anything else a Number 6 glove inflated with air (these members, by the way, have since been named rather aptly by that distinguished anatomist and original dog, Professor Howes, the *hands*)—all combined to produce an effect akin to stupefaction. I stood there ecstatic, unprogressive, immoderate; while swiftly and surely ungovernable affection for all Wenuses gripped me.

Meanwhile I heard inarticulate exclamations on all sides.

"Shameless hussies!" cried a woman near me.

"By Jove, that's something like!" said a young man who had been reading Captain Coe's finals, swinging round towards the Crinoline, with one foot arrested in mid-air.

My inclination when I recovered partial self-possession was to make instantly for the Crinoline and avow my devotion and allegiance, but at that moment I caught the eye of my wife, who had followed me to the Park, and I hastily turned my back on the centre of attraction. I saw, however, that Pendriver was using his spade to cleave his way to the Wenuses; and Swears was standing on the brink of the pit transfixed with adoration; while a young shopman from Woking, in town for the day, completely lost his head. It came bobbing over the grass to my very feet; but I remembered the experiences of Pollock and the Porroh man and let it go.

The news of our visitors seemed to have spread by some subtle magic, for in every direction I could see nothing but running men, some with women pulling at their sleeves and coat-tails to detain them, advancing by great strides towards us. Even a policeman was among them, rubbing his eyes. My wife broke through the crowd and grasped me firmly by the arm.

"Pozy," she said, "this is my opportunity and I mean to use it. I was kept doing nothing between pages 68 and 296 of the other book, and this time I mean to work. Look at these fools rushing to their doom. In another moment they will be mashed, mashed to jelly; and you too, unless I prevent it. I know what these Wenuses are. Haven't I had a scientific training? You will be mashed, I tell you—mashed!"

So saying she banged on the ground with her umbrella, which, I remember now with sorrow, we had bought the week before at Derry and Toms' for five-and-eleven-three.

Meanwhile a few of the men had to some extent recovered, and headed by the R.S.P.C.A. Secretary had formed a deputation, and were busy talking on their fingers to the Wenuses. But the Wenuses were too much occupied in dropping into each other's eyes something from a bright flask, which I took to be Beggarstuffs' Elect Bel-ladonna, to heed them.

I turned in response to a tug at my swallow-tails from my wife, and when I looked again a row of Wenuses with closed lids stood before the Crinoline. Suddenly they opened their eyes and flashed them on the men before them. The effect was instantaneous. The deputation, as the glance touched them, fell like skittles—viscous, protoplasmic masses, victims of the terrible Mash-Glance of the Wenuses.

I attributed my own escape to the prompt action of my wife, who stood before and shielded me, for upon women the Mash-Glance had no effect. The ray must have missed me only by a second, for my elbow which was not wholly covered by my wife's bulk was scorched, and my hat has never since recovered its pristine gloss. Turning, I saw a bus-driver in Knightsbridge leap up and explode, while his conductor clutched at the rail, missed it and fell overboard; farther still, on the distant horizon, the bricklayers on a gigantic scaffolding went off bang against the lemon-yellow of the sky as the glance reached them, and the Bachelors' Club at Albert Gate fell with a crash. All this had happened with such swiftness, that I was dumbfounded. Then, after a few moments, my wife slowly and reluctantly stepped aside and allowed me to survey the scene. The Wenuses, having scored their first victory, once more had retired into the recesses of the Crinoline. The ground for some distance was littered with the bodies of the mashed; I alone among men stood erect, my conscious companions being a sprinkling of women, pictures of ungovernable fury.

Yet my feeling was not one of joy at my escape. Strange mind of man!—instead, even with the Wenuses' victims lying all around me, my heart went out to the Crinoline and its astral occupants. I, too,

wished to be mashed. And suddenly I was aware that my wife knew that I was thinking thus. With an effort I turned and began a stumbling run through the Park.