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SPRING TERM 1959

SENIOR ENGLISH II
BOOK REVIEW PROGRAMME

by

Edward Blishen

Rehearsal: Saturday, 21st February 1959 10.00 a.m.
Recording: Saturday, 21st February 1959 12.30 - 1.15 p.m.
TRANSMISSION: BBC HOME SERVICE (SCHOOLS)
Tuesday, 24th February 1959 2.20 - 2.40 p.m.

1. ANNOUNCER: Senior English. Today we have a Book Review programme.
Here is Edward Blishen to talk to you.

2. EDWARD
BLISHEN: Both of the first two books I want to talk about today
belong to what people call science fiction. You know
the sort of things: stories that involve imagining
some remarkable scientific invention: or stories about
exploring space or about the world as it might be in
the future. One of the books - you may know it -
is THE TIME MACHINE by H.G. Wells: the other is
THE DOMES OF PICO by Hugh Walters.

(A)

Now, there are a number of, I think, fascinating
differences between these two books: and it's more
than just that the first was written about sixty years
ago, and the other was published last year. But
let's look at them.
To begin with, the invention in the first. It's
not - as the invention is in the second - a stream-lined
rocket: it's just a sort of ... bicycle. (That, at
any rate, is how I see it, when - with a rather
unscientific mind - I try to imagine it from the
description the author gives of it.) And the
scientist - the hero. He's never in his life said,
"Four - three - two - one - zero - FIRE!". He doesn't
even wear overalls.. We meet him first at his house,

1. EDWARD BLISHEN:
(Contd.) giving dinner to his friends. There's some talk about the three dimensions, and the scientist says there's a fourth: the dimension of Time. What is more, he says he's discovered how to move through that dimension. When his friends puff at their cigars and look unbelieving, he goes to his laboratory - and that's just a shed at the back of the house - and brings in a model of what he calls his Time Machine.. A little ... bicycle. He puts it on a table, gets one of his friends to press a lever, and the thing disappears. It has gone, he says, into Time: past or future, he's not sure which, (~~but if it works properly, it will return~~). Well, of course, his friends think it's a trick: but when they come again for dinner the next week, the scientist isn't there. He doesn't arrive until dinner is almost over - and his appearance astonishes them. His coat is dirty, his face is pale and cut, he is limping. And then, when he has changed his clothes and eaten, he says *thus*:
2. TIME TRAVELLER:
I will tell you the story of what has happened to me, if you like.. Most of it will sound like lying. So be it! It's true, every word of it, all the same. I was in my laboratory at four o'clock, and since then.. I ~~was~~ ^{have} lived eight days .. such days as no human being ever lived before..
3. BLISHEN: Well, his story begins. He'd got on the saddle of *his* ~~the~~ Time Machine, he'd pressed the starting lever and off he'd gone. Into the future. At great speed. There's a wonderful description here of this extraordinary journey - across Time, across eight hundred thousand years, with day and night flashing by..

1. TIME TRAVELLER: I saw the sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute marking a day. I saw trees growing and changing like puffs of vapour, now brown, now green; they grew, spread, shivered, and passed away. I saw huge buildings rise up... and pass like dreams. The whole surface of the earth seemed changed - melting and flowing under my eyes..
2. BLISHEN: He comes to a halt at last in the year Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One A.D. - he knows that's when it is, because there's a little dial on the machine that counts the years. The world, he finds, is full of strange, pretty, very little men and women - only four feet high - very gentle people. ~~It seems as if he need not have taken the precaution he does take - of removing the starting levers from his machine, so that it can't be meddled with. These people aren't very curious~~ They take a gentle interest in him but it soon passes: they aren't able to interest themselves in anything for very long at a time. They don't work, they simply play, bathe, gather flowers. There are no individual houses any more - only the ruins of great buildings, in which the little people sleep and eat. The scientist - the Time Traveller - realizes what has happened to the human race. Life has become so easy that men and women have nothing to struggle for any more. They have become too gentle, too... happy. *But are they* Happy? He wonders about that when he makes his first appalling discovery... He has left the machine on a lawn, near a great white Sphinx on a bronze pedestal. He goes back to it. Listen..

1. TIME TRAVELLER: My eye travelled along to the figure of the White Sphinx, growing distinct as the light of the rising moon grew higher. I could see the silver birch against it. There was the little lawn. I looked at the lawn again. A queer doubt chilled me.. 'No', I said to myself, 'that was not the lawn.'
But it was the lawn. For the white leprous face of the sphinx was towards it. Can you imagine what I felt as this conviction came home to me? But you cannot. The Time Machine was gone!
2. BLISHEN: And so there he is, trapped in the far-distant future. Who has stolen the machine? ^{It's} Not the gentle little people. But there are, he discovers in his frantic search - there are, here and there, great deep circular wells, from which a sound comes as of machinery thudding away.. And the little people are terrified of things that come up in the dark.. Well, I mustn't tell you more: I just want to say two things: first, that the rest of the story is really unforgettable.. the strange dying world and its terror: and second, that here's a piece of science fiction oddly different from the one I want to talk about next - THE DOMES OF PICO ^{trap} (P - I - C - O). ^{Now}
H. G. Wells wrote THE TIME MACHINE, as I've said, about sixty years ago. As you can see, it's ~~well, can I put it like this?~~ a sort of scientific fairy tale. The story of the second book is very nearly as fantastic. But there's nothing of the fairy tale about it. It's extraordinarily real, practical: almost, one might say, if it weren't quite the wrong word in this connection - almost down-to-earth. It begins in England with the breakdown,

1. BLISHEN:
(Cont.)

the sudden, strange breakdown, of all the atomic energy stations. Then news comes in that stations have broken down all over the world. Young Chris Godfrey, who's studying science at the university, is visited by his old friend Sir George Benson, who's Director of the Rocket Research Station in Woomera, Australia. Sir George tells him that the cause of the breakdown of the atomic energy stations is known. Strange cones ~~strange conical~~ ^{-shaped} structures - have appeared on the moon, near the crater Pico, and it is quite certain that the Earth is being bombarded with a stream of neutrons coming from these cones. Now, Chris is the only person on earth who has ever been up in a space rocket. On that occasion he was nearly killed. And now Sir George - very uncomfortably, very unhappily - has a request to make of him. He wants Chris to go up again.

There's a plan - the British and Americans and Russians are in it together - to bomb the cones on the moon. But if this is to be done successfully, someone must go up in a rocket and fire a beacon which will enable the bombs to be properly aimed. That is the terrible job Chris is asked to do. ^{He agrees to do it.} ~~Fantastic,~~ you think? Yes, but somehow it doesn't seem so. The author writes so calmly, puts in so many fascinating technical facts, that it doesn't seem at all unlikely. There's no little time-travelling bicycles here: no vague half-magic constructions of ivory and quartz, as ~~the Time Machine was!~~. Listen to what happens when ~~Chris~~ ^{he} has actually begun his dreadful journey. His course is being checked on earth:

1. NARRATOR The tracking stations now began to come in with their reports. Readings from them were correlated and the result was passed to Sir George. In front of him the Director had a huge graph. On it was a red line showing the height he had calculated the rocket should be after any given lapse of time. As the data was handed over to him, Benson was completing a black line showing the actual altitude of the rocket.

He was worried. The black line was falling below the red one..

Just then a sound came over the loudspeaker. It was Chris trying out his vocal chords. Anyway, the boy was all right and Benson spoke into the microphone cheerful words of encouragement. ~~But~~ The rocket was still falling behind and now there was quite a wide gap between the two lines. What on earth was happening?

2. BLISHEN You see - one simply can't disbelieve something so quietly - tensely but quietly - written. This is a very exciting book indeed - I haven't time to tell you about the ~~mysterious scientist, Sir Leo Freyling,~~ ^{awful secret that's kept from Chris and George.} who's in charge of the great operation: or about the awful secret that's kept from Chris and even from Sir George - and I think you'd find it fascinating to ~~compare it with the H. G. Wells.~~ Part of the excitement comes from certain questions that the book makes you ask yourself. For example: was it right or wrong to send Chris up in the rocket -(bearing in mind the awful secret)? The book - and this is one of the things I liked about it - makes you puzzle over problems like that. It doesn't take it for granted, as so many stories do, that a hero never thinks twice about being heroic. ~~And there's a sudden twist at the end of~~

1. BLISHEN
(Contd.)

~~the story - I wish I could know what you thought of~~
~~that~~. Anyway, I promise you great excitement, and
these and other interesting questions to think
over, if you read THE DOMES OF PICO, by Hugh Walters.