

The Caves of Steel is another such Wellsian panorama. (Perhaps too Wellsian in one detail: the "Expressways"—roads which move in strips of differing speeds—were described by Wells in *The Sleeper Awakes* over half a century ago.) Yet it's more than just a view, for Asimov has linked it to an ingenious crime story.

His hero, Bailey, is a police detective. Not a happy one, for few men are happy in his world. The teeming millions of Earth huddle together in their vast, steel-enclosed cities—the Caves of Steel—never seeing the sky or the stars. There are 8,000,000,000 of them in the world, twenty million in New York alone. They're herds, frightened of the open spaces outside their cities, frightened of life itself. And no wonder. It's a Slave New World. They must work like mad just to maintain their low standard of living. Production is only an hour ahead of consumption, and if they fall behind by sixty minutes, starvation begins.

Food is poor, synthetic stuff. Their homes are cell-like flats. A washbasin in the bedroom is a privilege to be worked for.

Yet their ancestors were real men who ventured among the stars and colonized planets. This is the story of the men who stayed behind and lost their self-respect. So they hate themselves and they hate the "Spacers" (descendants of the colonists) who return to Earth to try to help them.

The Spacers pity them but keep their distance, for they consider the degenerate Earthmen dirty and diseased. They try to relieve the Earthmen from the crushing burden of labour by supplying them with robots. It only humiliates the Earthmen further. A reactionary group, called the "Medievalists," start a Back-to-the-Land movement to try to regain independence and self-respect. But there is no way back. In the hatred born of frustration they smash the robots and one of them kills a Spacer.

The Spacers direct Bailey to discover this unknown killer. To his disgust, they make him accept a robot, Daneel, as his assistant—and guardian. The supremely logical but emotionless Daneel is a character in himself. Their joint hunt through the Caves of Steel, uncovering suspects and becoming themselves enmeshed in a net of suspicion, is first-rate story-telling. The reader, like Bailey himself, is constantly baffled and kept wondering—until the solution in the last few pages.

It's science fiction, and a crime story, and something more. Bailey and his wife are almost symbolic characters in their world of frustration and despair. Victims of their own emotions, they envy the robot Daneel his calm—and yet despise him for it too.

Over all hangs the atmosphere of the metal-bound City.

"Although the evening is unseen, apartment lights dim as the hours of darkness pass and the City's pulse sinks. Though no one can tell noon from midnight by any cosmic phenomenon along the enclosed avenues of the City, mankind follows the mute partitionings of the hour hand.

"The expressways empty, the noise of life sinks, the moving mob among the colossal alleys melts away; New York City lies in Earth's unnoticed shadow, and its population sleeps."

A nightmare place. But in the end there is hope that the Earthmen may free themselves from these self-made prisons, the Caves of Steel.

FOR THE SF STUDENT

Over forty years ago, before the first world war, a writer rapidly building his reputation as a novelist, wrote a book which has come in time to be recognised as a classic of science fiction. The writer was A. J. Beresford and the book "The Hampshire Wonder." Below, I. O. Evans,

writer and life-long student of science fiction, gives an evaluation of the book:

A baby in arms reduces a carriageful of passengers, by merely glancing at them, into a confused and shamefaced silence—for that matter, he had similarly subdued the doctor and the midwife who were present at his birth. When about four years of age, his penetrating questions on the sources of the Bible convince the local parson that the child is possessed by a devil. At six, he has read through the encyclopaedia and has dismissed it contemptuously as "so elementary . . . inchoate . . . a disjunctive . . . patch-work." Nor is this the end of his intellectual achievements. Were such a character described in a recent book, it would at once be recognised as a "mutation," probably produced by "radiations" from experiments into atomic structure. The interesting thing about *The Hampshire Wonder* is that it was written over forty years ago! If one disregards H. G. Wells' giants and Martians and his Grand Lunar, it is indeed one of the earliest studies of a superhuman intelligence, and as such it is of the greatest interest to the student of science fiction.

It is moreover interesting in its own right. The young superman lacks the tactful amiability of Wilmar Shtras' *Children of the Atom*, but on the other hand he is not a malignant and murderous superhuman monster like Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John*; he is almost pure intelligence in human guise. His career is interestingly described; Mr. Beresford is obviously under the influence, both in matter and in style, of H. G. Wells. And the end of this book, which the reader is left to discover for himself, is, to put it mildly, plausible; so, indeed, might events take place were a superhuman being of this type to manifest himself in quasi-human form.

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The Club has acquired the remaining stock of this fascinating book and copies are available to members, price 3s. 6d., post free, from I Tavistock Chambers, Bloomsbury Way, London, W.C.1.