

A Dream of Armageddon

Adapted from H G Wells

It was a cold, grey afternoon when the man with the pale face stepped into my train carriage at Rugby station. He moved slowly, as if every step took great effort, even though his porter was rushing behind him, carrying bags and urging him to hurry. As he climbed aboard, I couldn't help but notice how unwell he looked. His face was thin, almost ghostly, with dark circles under his eyes. He sank into the corner seat opposite me, let out a heavy sigh, and stared blankly out the window. His hands rested limply on his lap, and he seemed lost in a world of his own.

I was reading a book, *Dream States* by Fortnum-Roscoe, and I glanced at him again. He was still staring, his eyes empty, like he saw nothing of the world passing by outside. Then, as if he felt my gaze, he turned his head slightly and looked at me. His expression was tired, almost lifeless. He reached for a newspaper on the seat beside him, but his hand moved weakly, like he didn't care about it. He looked at me again, and I quickly turned my eyes back to my book, not wanting to make him uncomfortable.

To my surprise, he spoke. His voice was soft, almost a whisper. "Sorry?" I said, not sure if I'd heard him correctly.

"That book," he said, pointing a thin finger at it, "is about dreams, isn't it?"

"Yes," I replied, nodding. The title was clear on the cover, so it wasn't a surprise he knew. "It's about how dreams work."

He was quiet for a long moment, as if he was searching for the right words. His fingers played with the edge of his coat, twisting the fabric nervously. "Yes," he said at last, "but those books don't tell you anything real about dreams."

I didn't understand what he meant at first. I tilted my head, waiting for him to explain.

"They don't know," he added, his voice a little stronger now. "They don't really understand dreams."

I looked at his face more closely. His skin was pale, almost white, and his eyes seemed to hold a deep sadness. "There are dreams," he said slowly, "and then there are dreams."

I didn't argue. I've never been one to argue about things like dreams or feelings. Everyone has their own ideas about them, and I wasn't sure what he was trying to say. But something about his voice, so serious and heavy, made me listen.

He leaned forward slightly, his eyes fixed on mine. "Do you ever dream?" he asked suddenly. "I mean, really clear dreams? Dreams that feel so real you can't tell if they happened or not?"

I thought for a moment. "I don't dream much," I said. "Maybe three clear dreams a year. Most of the time, my dreams are fuzzy, and I forget them when I wake up."

"Ah," he said, nodding as if my answer meant something important. He looked out the window again, his fingers tapping lightly on the seat. Then he turned back to me. "Do your dreams ever mix with your memories? Do you ever wake up and wonder, 'Did this really happen, or was it just a dream?'"

"Almost never," I said. "Sometimes, for a second, I might wonder, but then I know it was a dream. It's rare for me to mix them up."

He pointed at my book again. "Does that book say anything about that? About dreams feeling so real they mix with your life?"

"Yes," I said. "It says it happens sometimes, but not often. It talks about how strong feelings or clear images in a dream can make it seem real. The book gives some reasons for it, like how the mind holds onto things that feel important. You probably know some of those ideas."

He shook his head slowly. "I know very little about those things," he said. "Except that they're wrong."

His words surprised me. I wasn't sure what to say. His hand, thin and bony, touched the strap of the window, holding it tightly for a moment. I thought he might stop talking, so I opened my book again, ready to read. But then he leaned forward, closer to me, his voice low and urgent.

"Isn't there something called continuous dreaming?" he asked. "Dreams that go on night after night, like a story that doesn't stop?"

"Yes," I said, remembering something from my book. "Some books about the mind talk about it. They say it happens to people with certain problems, like stress or worry. They call it a kind of mental trouble."

“Mental trouble!” he said, almost laughing, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “Yes, maybe they call it that. But what I mean—” He stopped and looked down at his hands. His fingers were knotted together, and he stared at them like they held an answer. “Is it always a dream? Or could it be something else? Something... more?”

I wanted to tell him to stop, to say I wasn’t interested in his strange questions. But his face, so full of worry and fear, made me keep listening. I remembered his eyes now, faded and tired, with red around them, like he hadn’t slept in days. I’ve seen that look before, in people who carry heavy burdens.

“I’m not just talking to pass the time,” he said, his voice shaking. “This is killing me.”

“Dreams?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“If they’re dreams,” he said. “Every night, they’re so clear, so real... this—” he waved a hand at the window, where fields and houses rushed by, “this world feels fake compared to them! I can hardly remember who I am, why I’m here, what I’m supposed to do.”

He paused, breathing heavily, like the words had taken all his strength. “Even now,” he whispered, “it’s hard to know what’s real.”

“Is it always the same dream?” I asked, curious despite myself.

“It’s finished,” he said, his voice flat.

“Finished?”

“I died.”

“Died?” I repeated, shocked.

“Killed,” he said. “Destroyed. Smashed to pieces. And now, the part of me that lived in that dream is gone forever. I dreamed I was another man, you know, living in a different place, a different time. Every night, I went back to that life. New places, new events, all so clear—until the last night.”

“When you died?” I asked, my voice quiet.

“Yes,” he said. “When I died.”

“And after that?” I said, leaning forward.

“No more,” he said. “Thank God, it stopped. That was the end of the dream.”

I knew he was going to tell me the whole story. The light outside was fading, turning the world gray, and my book wasn't interesting anymore. I closed it and looked at him. "A different time?" I said. "Like the past?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "The future."

"The future?" I said. "Like the year 3000?"

"I don't know what year it was," he said. "In the dream, I knew. I knew everything about that world. But now, awake, I've forgotten so much. They called the years differently, not like we do. I try to remember, but—" He put a hand to his forehead, pressing hard, like he could force the memory out. "No, it's gone."

He smiled weakly, his lips barely moving. I thought he might stop there, that he wouldn't tell me more. I don't usually like hearing about people's dreams—they're often boring or confusing—but this was different. Something about his voice, his fear, made me want to know. "How did it start?" I asked, trying to encourage him.

"It was so clear," he said, his eyes lighting up for the first time. "From the very beginning, it felt real. I didn't fade into it slowly, like some dreams. I woke up in the dream, suddenly, and it was as real as this moment. I was in a small place, like a balcony, looking out at the sea. I had been resting, maybe sleeping, and a girl was fanning me. When she stopped, I opened my eyes, and there I was."

"A girl?" I said, interested.

"Yes, a girl," he said, his voice softening. "Please don't interrupt, or I'll lose my thoughts. It's hard to keep it all straight."

He paused, looking at me, as if checking if I believed him. "You won't think I'm crazy?" he asked.

"No," I said quickly. "It's just a dream. Tell me about it."

He nodded, relieved. "I woke up because the girl stopped fanning me. I wasn't surprised to be there, you know. It didn't feel like I had just arrived in a strange place. It felt normal, like I belonged there. My memories of this life—this real life, here on this train—faded away. I didn't think about them at all. I knew my name wasn't Cooper anymore. It was Hedon. I knew who I was, what my life was like in that world. It was all so clear then, like I'd always lived there. But

now, awake, it's hard to piece it together. The memories don't connect anymore."

He stopped, gripping the window strap tightly, his knuckles white. He looked at me, his eyes pleading. "Does this sound silly to you?"

"No!" I said, shaking my head. "It sounds... interesting. Tell me about this place. What was it like?"

"It wasn't exactly a balcony," he said, thinking hard. "I don't know the right word for it. It was a small space, facing south, high above the sea. Most of it was in shadow, cool and quiet, except for a curve above the balcony where you could see the sky and the water. I was lying on a metal couch with soft, striped cushions. The girl stood by the balcony, her back to me, looking out. The sunrise touched her face, her ear, her neck, and her white shoulder. Her dress was simple, flowing, like it was made of light fabric that moved with the breeze. She was so beautiful, standing there, that it hit me all at once, like I was seeing her for the first time. When I sighed and sat up, she turned and looked at me."

He stopped, his voice catching in his throat. He looked down at his hands, twisting them together. "I'm fifty-three years old," he said quietly. "I've known many people in my life—my mother, my sisters, my wife, my daughters. I know their faces, the way they smile or frown. But this girl's face—it's more real to me than any of them. I can close my eyes and see it perfectly, like I could draw it or paint it. It's so clear, even now."

He paused again, his eyes distant. "The face of a dream," he said. "She was beautiful, but not in a cold or frightening way, like a statue. Her beauty was warm, gentle. Her lips were soft, and they smiled easily. Her eyes were gray, serious, but kind. She moved so gracefully, like she was part of everything good and peaceful in the world."

He looked down, his face hidden for a moment. Then he lifted his head and went on, his voice strong with belief. "You see, I had given up everything for her. Everything I had worked for, everything I had wanted—my plans, my power, my reputation. In that world, I was a great man in the north, with wealth and influence. People looked to me for leadership. But none of it mattered when I saw her. I left it all behind and came to this city, a place full of sunlight and pleasure, just to be with her. I loved her before I even knew she

cared for me. Before I dared to hope we could be together. Without her, my life felt empty, like dust and ashes.”

He stopped, his hands shaking slightly. “It’s hard to explain,” he said. “It’s not just words. It’s a feeling, a light that changes everything around you. When I was with her, nothing else mattered. I left the people in the north, where I was a leader. Millions of people trusted me, followed me. I was part of a big game—a political game, full of lies, fights, and tricks. I fought against a group called the Gang, a mix of selfish plans and loud words that kept the world noisy and blind. They were leading the world toward disaster, and I was trying to stop them. In my dream, I knew every detail of that world, every plan, every danger. But now, awake, it’s all faded, like a story I can’t quite remember.”

He rubbed his eyes, looking tired. “When I woke up in that dream, sitting with her by the sea, I was so happy to be free of it all. I looked at her and thought, ‘This is life—love, beauty, happiness. Why did I ever waste my time fighting for power?’ I blamed myself for wanting to be a leader. If I hadn’t been so serious when I was young, I might have chased empty things, worthless people. But she—she was worth everything. She made my life full.”

He smiled faintly, remembering. “I said to her, ‘You are worth it, my love. You are worth every sacrifice.’ I didn’t mean for her to hear, but she did. She turned and called to me, ‘Come and see the sunrise on Monte Solaro.’ Her voice was clear, like music.”

I couldn’t help interrupting. “I’ve been to Capri,” I said. “I climbed Monte Solaro once. The view is beautiful, but the wine they serve up there tastes like muddy cider.”

He looked at me, his eyes wide. “Then you might know if this was Capri,” he said. “I’ve never been there in this life, not really. But let me describe it, and you can tell me if it sounds right. We were in a small room, high above the sea, carved into a rocky cliff. The whole island was one huge hotel, so big and complex I couldn’t understand it all. There were floating hotels in the water, and huge platforms where flying machines landed, bringing people from all over the world. To the east, there was a tall cliff, gray but touched with gold where the sun hit it. Beyond it, I could see a coastline fading into the sunrise. To the west, there was a small bay, still in shadow, with a mountain rising above it—Monte Solaro, she called it. The sea was full of boats, sailing in every direction, their sails catching the light.”

I nodded. “That sounds like Capri,” I said. “There’s a rock there, called Faraglioni, with a hole in it where the sea flows through.”

“Yes!” he said, excited. “She called it that—Faraglioni. There was a story about it, but I can’t remember it now.”

He leaned back, his voice softening again. “That was the first thing I remember from the dream. That room, the sea, the sunlight, and her. We talked in whispers, not because anyone was listening, but because our thoughts felt so new, so fragile, like they needed to be gentle. It was peaceful, sitting there with her, watching the world wake up. Later, we were hungry, so we left our room. We walked through a strange passage with a floor that moved, like a belt carrying us along. It took us to a huge dining room, bright with sunlight. There was a fountain in the middle, splashing water, and soft music played. We sat and ate, smiling at each other, happy to be together.”

He paused, his face glowing with the memory. “After breakfast, we went to a dancing hall. It was enormous, bigger than any building I’ve ever seen. The walls were decorated with gold and lights, and there were strange statues—dragons and other figures—holding glowing lamps. The ceiling sparkled like stars. People filled the hall, thousands of them, dressed in bright colors, with flowers in their hair. They danced in a great circle, moving to music that was richer, more beautiful than anything I’ve heard in this life. We danced too, and she moved so gracefully, her face serious but her eyes smiling at me. I felt like the luckiest man in the world.”

His smile faded. “But then a man came to talk to me. He was different from the others—serious, dressed in plain clothes, not bright or fancy. I had noticed him watching me earlier, in the dining room. He had followed us, and I had avoided his eyes. Now, he came to where we were sitting, resting after our dance. He asked to speak to me alone, but I refused. ‘I have no secrets from her,’ I told him. He said it was a boring matter, not for a lady to hear. I insisted he speak anyway.”

The man’s face grew tense. “He asked if I had heard about Evesham, a man I worked with in the north. Evesham was my partner, a strong leader but hard and reckless. He had made a bold speech, full of threats, stirring up trouble. This man told me the north needed me back. They were confused, falling apart without me. He asked for my advice, my help. As he talked, I could feel my old life pulling at me. I could see myself returning, leading again, fixing their

problems. It would be dramatic, powerful. But then I looked at her, sitting beside me, watching us.”

He swallowed hard. “I knew I couldn’t go back. Not with her. Our relationship—there were reasons, things I can’t explain, that meant she couldn’t come with me. If I went back, I’d have to leave her, give her up completely. The man knew it too. He looked at her, then at me, and I saw it in his eyes—he knew I’d have to choose. I got angry. ‘I’m done with that life,’ I shouted. ‘I’ve left it all behind. I’m a private man now. Why can’t you leave me alone?’”

The man walked away, but his words stayed with my companion. He grew quiet, lost in thought. His lady noticed. “Dear,” she said softly, “if they need you—”

She didn’t finish, but he knew what she meant. “No,” he said firmly. “They just want me to do what they’re afraid to do. There won’t be war. Trust me, I know this world. They have no right to pull me back. I chose this life—with you.”

He took her hand, trying to push the worry away. He spoke of happy things—the sea, the sunlight, their love. They laughed and swam in the warm water, splashing each other like children. For a while, they forgot the world’s troubles. But soon, those troubles came closer.

One evening, they stood on a hill, looking at the sky. Warplanes appeared, circling far away, sent by Evesham. They moved like birds, dark against the sunset. She watched them, her face pale. “Go back,” she said, her voice breaking. “This life we’re living—it’s death. Go back to your duty.”

“No,” he said, holding her close. “I’ve chosen you. Nothing will change that, not even war. I won’t leave you.”

They walked under the stars, talking, convincing themselves their love was worth more than the world’s problems. He spoke of their life together, how it was heroic, how it made everything else small. She listened, torn between her love for him and her fear of what was coming. They held each other tightly, pretending the world wasn’t falling apart.

But that was his last chance to go back. Soon, war broke out, sudden and fierce, like a hurricane. Capri, once a place of peace and pleasure, changed overnight. People shouted war songs, wore badges for Evesham, and drilled for battle. The island was alive with noise and fear. He and his lady felt like

strangers. A woman yelled at her for not wearing a badge, and he burned with anger, wanting to protect her.

“We have to leave,” he told her. “This isn’t our place anymore. I chose you, and I won’t let this war touch us.”

They fled in a small boat, sailing southwest, away from Capri. They hoped to find a quiet place, far from the fighting. But the war followed them. They saw planes in the sky, heard the distant boom of guns. They walked through a land torn by battle, hungry and tired, their clothes dirty and torn. She was weak, but so brave, never complaining. They kept moving, searching for safety, holding onto their dream of a life together.

They reached Paestum, a flat, empty place with old temples standing alone. It was quiet, but the air felt heavy with danger. She sat under a bush, resting, her face thin and pale. He stood nearby, watching the horizon, listening to the faint sound of guns. “We’re trapped,” he said, his voice low. “The armies are closing in. I can feel it.”

She began to cry, her sobs soft but heartbreaking. “If I had let you go,” she said, “if we had parted—”

“No,” he said, kneeling beside her. “I don’t regret my choice. I chose you, and I’ll hold on to that until the end.”

Then, a flash lit the sky. Bullets rained down, hitting the ground around them, chipping stones and kicking up dust. He turned, his heart racing, and saw her stand, reaching for him, her eyes wide with fear. Before he could move, a bullet struck her chest. She fell, silent, her body still.

He ran to her, lifting her in his arms. “No,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “No, no, no.” He carried her to the temples, as if their ancient stones could protect her. But she was gone, her eyes closed, her face peaceful. He sat with her, holding her close, talking to her as if she could hear. “I’m here,” he said. “I won’t leave you.”

The world was quiet, but war was all around. Lizards ran across the stones, as if nothing had changed. Planes fought in the sky, and one crashed into the sea, twisting like a wounded bird. Shells exploded nearby, but he didn’t care. He sat, numb, lost in grief.

Hours passed, and then he saw soldiers coming, climbing over the old walls of the ruined city. They wore dirty uniforms, their faces hard. He stood, shouting, "Stay away! This is my place, with my dead!"

Their leader, a man with a scarred face and dull eyes, came closer, his sword drawn. He shouted something in a language my companion didn't understand. "You can't come here," he said again, his voice steady. "These are sacred places, and I'm here with her."

The man kept coming, his face angry. My companion grabbed his arm, stopping him. "She's dead," he said, his voice breaking. "Don't you understand?"

The soldier's eyes flashed with something cruel. He pulled back his sword and thrust it forward, piercing my companion's heart. "I felt no pain," he said, his voice faint. "Just surprise, like it wasn't real. Then darkness came, swallowing everything."

The train slowed as we reached Euston station, the noise of the brakes pulling me back to the present. I looked at him, his face pale and drawn. "Was that the end?" I asked.

He hesitated, his eyes distant. "No," he whispered. "I woke again, just for a moment. I was sitting in the temple, her body beside me. But it wasn't her anymore. It was just... empty. I heard voices, men coming closer. I couldn't reach her, couldn't protect her. Then nightmares came—huge birds, fighting, tearing at each other, tearing at me."

The carriage door opened, and a porter's voice broke the silence. "Euston!" he called. The man fell silent, his story unfinished, lost in the noise of the station.