

Homage to Science

A corollary to Cunninghame Graham's attitude to civilisation and industrialisation is his attitude to science. While allowing applied science a due place in life's economy, he bursts the bubble of its pretentiousness. He deals with it as Isaiah deals with those who worship idols made by human hands, allowing the art, casting ridicule on the homage. The chief marvel of human discovery, he asserts, is in the miracles which reside in the world, not in their laborious unearthing¹. Inventions may, in the end, make no contribution to significant living. What gain is there in taking a good dull man by air to Baghdad and bringing him back to ignorance still²? The merely technical achievement of science bears no comparison to the permanent achievement of philosophy. Inventions become outdated, Plato never³. Science can very readily be the ally of superstition, making itself seem all-sufficient in the human mind, so that one part of that mind remains credulous and dark⁴. It is forever revising its certainties, so that to arrogate authority to it is incongruous. Dogmatism belongs to pseudo-scientists⁵. In an article entitled "Science by Cablegram"⁶ which gives the best exposition of his evaluation of science, he derides those who

".....find the germs of all disease, now in a microbe or bacillus, and then fall down and worship what they have found, and in a year or two cast down the microbe and bacillus and find another God".

The ingenuousness of the scientist who thinks his discipline a total one, and sends out his products haphazardly into a world believed capable of handling them altruistically is exposed in the passage:

"I see the man of science, bit by bit surmounting difficulties, solving problems, working whilst others sleep, so that in future, all may sleep sounder, disease controlled, and still remaining in himself, apart from science, a mere child in knowledge of affairs, and thinking the Stock Exchange a noble institution to enable nations mutually to self-develop one another; believing Parliament to be the assembled wisdom, purity, virtue and patriotism of the land; taking all women to be pure, all men brave, all editors to be men to whom it is given in trust the direction of the public mind, and all imbued with the dignity of their position; and taking ministers of all religions (though he believes in one) to be modest and unsectarian....."⁷.

So life is eased and made bitter from the same source. Machines lighten toil and lighten wages. "Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be"⁸.

Genuinely and generously, Cunninghame Graham expressed gratitude for dedicated scientists⁹. But he saw the ill wished on the world when science was separated in its

¹ Preface to "The Canon".

² "Redeemed", p.62.

³ Preface to "The Canon".

⁴ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Sinu", p.5.

⁵ "Progress", p.185.

⁶ In "The Social Democrat", Vol 1, No. 1.

⁷ "Science By Cablegram": article in "The Social Democrat", Vol 1, No. 1.

⁸ The General Epistle of James, Chapter III, verse 10.

⁹ "Science By Cablegram": article in "The Social Democrat", Vol 1, No. 1.

activity from the larger issues of life, and was made self-authenticating in its procedures. The shock to scientists produced by the use of the atomic bomb, the work of their own brains and hands, illustrates half a century later, the correctness of his diagnosis and the timely nature of his warnings,. Science was being given the title of divinity when it was meant to be the humble servant of humanity. He will not worship, nor will he allow others tamely to worship, what is, after all, but an "idealised idol"¹.

¹ "Science By Cablegram": article in "The Social Democrat", Vol 1, No. 1.