

## b. Human Status.

Our standing in the Universe was afforded fresh scrutiny and tested by different perspectives in the Victorian age. This re-evaluation is still proceeding. We have not found a fixed place in the Universe. Continually, new dimensions of helplessness and hope for life are opening up. During Cuminghame Graham's long life, discussions on literature, science and art, on politics and economics, on home and foreign affairs, revolved on this question: What is man? Not - What is man that Thou art mindful of him?, for the supernatural was being absorbed in the natural, but - What is man?

The logic of the Newtonian conception of the dominance of mathematical law throughout the Universe, of Darwin's theory of evolution and its popular interpretation, of scientific evidence for the mind's dependence on the body, was the devaluation of human life. Few Victorians would face this logic. One who did was James Thomson:

"I find no hint throughout the Universe  
Of good or ill, of blessing or of curse  
I find alone Necessity Supreme  
With infinite Mystery, abysmal, dark,  
Unlighted ever by the faintest spark  
For us the flitting shadows of a dream"<sup>1</sup>.

Probably Tennyson better represented the general reaction to the New Knowledge, which was still too near to be seen in proportion. His hope is that "somehow good will be the final goal of ill", "that nothing walks with aimless feet": yet this is hope not certainty:

"....but what am I  
An infant crying in the night  
An infant crying for a light  
And with no language but a cry".

"I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,  
And gather dust and chaff, and call  
To what I feel is Lord of all  
And faintly trust the larger hope"<sup>2</sup>.

Some of the godly were more outright and found in invective the best defence against new knowledge, the best buttress of faith.

It is one of the paradoxical features of the Victorian age that the new dimension of antiquity given to human life and the new relationship perceived of that life to the rest of the created order, was accompanied by a great sense of human confidence. Sin was associated with the past and the backward, righteousness with the future and progressive. It was posited that the direction of humankind was the direction of nature

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in "Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians", p.235.

<sup>2</sup> In Memoriam, LIV and LV.

and that this direction was self-justified by an unseen, desirable goal of existence. It was felt that war would be bound to disappear, that better communications in themselves would improve international relationships, that misery was temporary. The fact was that for the middle classes the concrete material success of the Industrial Revolution outweighed the loss of certainty induced by mathematical and biological science.

The real standing of people in the working classes probably suffered from both aspects of Victorianism. Their status in the world as human beings was in doubt in terms of philosophical science. Whatever remedies were available would come through the operation of natural law: there was no call deliberately to raise their status. Ruskin's basic belief that the wealth of a country is well-fed, good men gained more acclaim than hearing ears and understanding hearts.

The externalising of life in terms of processes of nature and history which were self-contained and self-justifying, represented in the philosophy of Karl Marx, is accompanied in that philosophy by a different feature which was to look forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beneath the outward succession of events Marx saw the elements of class struggle in human society. The human consciousness itself at this time came in for scrutiny. Nietzsche and Freud distinguished irrational, usurping forces underneath its placid surface. Human beings became more of a mystery to themselves, with depths unrealised to match heights. At the turn of the century, too, detachment began to give way. Life began to be considered more important than any academic description of it. Economic and natural processes began to be interpreted as means of ministering to human life, which could be manipulated for human ends. New elements of fear and of promise were brought into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Cunninghame Graham stands both inside and outside this time. His estimation of humanity is a direct, personal one gained in encounter. Yet from the time of his early letters he reveals an active interest in human affairs, literature and architecture; and always he is conscious of the direction in which human life is tending, reacting in terms of that. The climate of philosophical thought probably encouraged his agnosticism concerning human life and destiny; at the same time he denounced fiercely the rape of human dignity in practice in an industrialised civilisation, and kicked against the apathy which counted the human condition a consequence of nature. With all the reverence he showed in his approach to nature, he maintained that processes and "laws" were to be manipulated by us for good ends, never to dominate, never to be entrusted with the automatic production of boon or bane. The heart of his agnosticism is his failure to square his insistence on human status with any final significance which might be given in terms of the Universe and ongoing history. The contribution of his thinking is the insistence in practice on the priority of life over theories, on persons over processes and on the real mystery of humankind's nature which defies categories. It amounts to a bursting of old wineskins without the provision of alternative, more adequate ones.

Professor West believes he shares the belief with Conrad that human beings are a part of nature and that our life and death are natural phenomena. Certainly he faces with James Thomson the consequences of such a belief. Life is again and again described as a mirage, a shadow, an insubstantial appearance on which we have no hold<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Mirages", pp.3. 5-7.

"Life the mysterious, the mocking, the inscrutable, unseizable, the uncomprehended essence of nothing and of everything"<sup>1</sup>, he calls it.

Human lives are:

".....after all passed in a circus, where they perform, even with less volition of their own than the trained animals; and pass away as the smoke of a cigarette dissolves into the air"<sup>2</sup>.

Yet with this futility of life, there remains some obligation laid upon us to act as if it were meaningful<sup>3</sup>. Having witnessed the crude slaughter of Indians, he says:

".....I checked my horse and began moralising on all kinds of things; upon tenacity of purpose, the futility of life, and the inexorable fate which mocks mankind, making all effort useless, whilst still urging us to strive"<sup>4</sup>.

The contradiction of this sense he often had of the meaninglessness of life was found in his own life of action: and he was aware of this tension all the time.

He found human beings strange, bafflingly motivated creatures, and never shared the confidence in our powers which the concrete gains of the Industrial Revolution engendered in others. He knew 'what was in man', and no man needed to tell him - it was not from books he learned. He knew humanity to be too various to classify. He flings out at:

".....those men who fudge a theory of mankind, thinking that everyone is forged upon their anvil, or run out of their mind, after the fashion of a tallow dip"<sup>5</sup>.

Well he knows the mystery of our contradictory nature:

"Who shall sound all the mysteries of the human heart, or put his finger on the motives that influence mankind? Humble in purple, swollen with pride in rags; puffed with good fortune or steadfast against all the whirligigs of fate; by turns a bar of iron or a weathercock - each man is, has been, and will ever be, a mystery to his fellow slaves, chained to this moving sphere"<sup>6</sup>.

When he draws the character of the Oldenburg captain in "Thirteen Stories", he illustrates his comprehension of the strange bed-fellows roosting together in one human character<sup>7</sup>. So it is with others; none are plain knave, plain fool or plain saint, but creatures to be delicately and sensitively understood and described, so that justice is done to their own unique many-sidedness<sup>8</sup>. He is at his best in giving judgement on the Spanish Conquistadors. He will not have them dismissed as mere treacherous filibusters, especially by those whose own country is even then engaged in filibustering expeditions abroad. He enters into an understanding of their courage in facing the unknown, their adventurousness, their endurance in trials, their strange mixture of simple faith and

<sup>1</sup> "Thirteen Stories", p.117.

<sup>2</sup> "Writ on Sand", p.11.

<sup>3</sup> He has the telling instance of a criminal setting a chair straight on the way to the scaffold, in "Hope", p.70.

<sup>4</sup> "Thirteen Stories", p.143.

<sup>5</sup> Preface to "A Vanished Arcadia".

<sup>6</sup> "A Brazilian Mystic", p.72. cf. "Success", p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Page 98.

<sup>8</sup> His favourite authors were those who did similar justice to the mystery of human existence; e.g., Shakespeare, Cervantes, Chaucer, de Maupassant.

ruthlessness: and from this vantage point he views sympathetically the temptations put before them by the defencelessness of the Indians against their superior fire-power, their love of gold, their craving for women and lands. In the end he does return an unfavourable verdict, but not before we have come to see that the conquistadors are such men as we ourselves are, and if we had the imagination and daring to undertake such wild adventure as they undertook, we probably would not have behaved any better. His judgement is enhanced by his understanding of the documents in Spanish relating to that time<sup>1</sup>.

A subtlety of understanding of human nature marks many of his observations. The way people can make the appearance of a protest a substitute for the cost of protesting in truth<sup>2</sup>; their preference to see others no better nor worse than themselves rather than be faced with their integrity<sup>3</sup>; the "little cheque, discreetly given, for imaginary services or future villainy"<sup>4</sup>; the eternal business of face-saving<sup>5</sup>; these he knows and describes so that they probe the quick on one's own behaviour.

His thought ranges from the venial cruelty of the gauchos to the culpable kindness of Dutch Smith, or the pious lady who cared for the Rev Arthur Bannerman's children. He knows humanity's power in rationalising, "that verbiage by means of which we put a fig-leaf over the realities of life"<sup>6</sup>. He gauged the part played by fear of others' opinions<sup>7</sup>. The part avarice played in human life was an open book to him<sup>8</sup>. The bribability of human beings is made clear in the story of the colt taken from its homeland. The owner is angry at the treatment given and would have refused to part with it:

".....but that the dollars kept him quiet, as they have rendered dumb priests, ministers of state, bishops and merchants, princes and peasants, and have closed the mouths of three parts of mankind, making them silent complices in all the villainies they see....."<sup>9</sup>.

Yet there remains a strange nobility in human beings, inexplicable, purposeless if life is purposeless. He catches the phenomenon with the pen of an artist in "Mirages". A theatre goes on fire. People trample on one another to death to get clear. On the stage three members of the orchestra, "ridiculous, heroic, berserkers", play on seeking to allay fear, till the flames envelop them. No one listens, no one is saved by their efforts, but their "fury of self-abnegation, unreasoning, sublime and foolish" stands out as a query on the other side about this strange mystery that is the human being. He observes the strange points where honour grips in a prostitute, and in one who would prostitute<sup>10</sup>. The trait of nobility is noted in simple, normal things, quite separate from any fanaticism, as in Miguel's dash to the train in Castile to obtain a lump of ice to ease his father's

<sup>1</sup> This verdict, compact of many references throughout his books, may be examined in "Hernando de Soto", p.xi, Preface; "The Conquest of the River Plate", p.195 and "Pedro de Valdivia", p.7.

<sup>2</sup> "Progress", p.277.

<sup>3</sup> re. Hidalgo, "Charity", p.34.

<sup>4</sup> "Redeemed", p.11.

<sup>5</sup> "Faith", pp. 181 and 182, and the story "Postponed" in "Success".

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.viii, Preface. Cf. The behaviour of Mercado in "Progress", p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> As in "his People", p.45, re. "the upright" keeping clear of prostitutes; and the weather eye of General in "Progress", p.50.

<sup>8</sup> See "His People", p.146; "Doughty Deeds", p.47; "Pedro de Valdivia", p.122.

<sup>9</sup> "Thirteen Stories", p.195.

<sup>10</sup> In "Hope", p.166, and "Thirteen Stories", p.233.

passing<sup>1</sup>. When human beings are treated as if nobility were not also indigenuous to their being, the whole story of creation is made tawdry. Cunninghame Graham feels on his pulses the affront when a man is treated as if he were but vile:

"God took mud out of the street and made his Englishman, the cheapest sort of man that could be done for money.

One would have thought, had one not been aware of the steadfastness of the Creator in union principles, that He had hired unskilled or blackleg labour for the job.... No man cared for him whether he lived or died, got fat or starved"<sup>2</sup>.

The overturning of the order of creation represented thus, is illustrated in a cutting aside: (prize fox terrier worth £100, chain value 1/6d, and girl's work value 3d)<sup>3</sup>.

The redemption of human nature as a genuine possibility, or indeed as a desirable one, does not come within his horizon. For all the evil of human life, for all the irremediable ill in human hearts<sup>4</sup>, (for he did not believe that progress would act as a cleansing agent), he prefers life to be left just as it is. It is as if he feels the colour and interest would be drawn from life if human nature were redeemed<sup>5</sup>. So we find he talks of saints as if they were a natural growth, inexplicable as are the vilest sinners, to be thankfully accepted as we accept the sun as well as the rain, but not to be laden with a redemptive hope for others<sup>6</sup>. They are not saviours but fairies:

"Those born in the ordinary, but miraculous fashion of mankind, who live apparently by bread alone, and yet remain beings apart, not touched by praise, ambition, or any of the things that move their fellows, are the true fairies after all"<sup>7</sup>.

I think he would count Christ a fairy. Though he calls Him "Saviour" and "Lord", I think he speaks in terms of perfect example, not of redemptive power. Life is not meant to be changed but to be lived just as it presents itself to one, lived to the full amid the shadows and sunshine which belong to the terms on which it is offered.

The one really unforgivable characteristic of human nature is "humbug" or hypocrisy. It is the increase of this in modern civilised society which makes him turn with relief to Spain where "...men are more simple in their villainy and their nobility than it is possible to be in the dim regions of electric light"<sup>8</sup>, to the gauchos who "are relatively honest in their worst actions, in a way we cannot understand at all in our more complicated life"<sup>9</sup>; to "Doughty Deeds" Graham and the Georgians who:

<sup>1</sup> The story "At Sanchidrian" in "A Hatchment".

<sup>2</sup> "Latitudinal Influence", article in "The People's Press", 4<sup>th</sup> October 1890.

<sup>3</sup> Article entitled "Utopia" in "The People's Press", 4<sup>th</sup> October 1890.

<sup>4</sup> In "Mogreb-el-Acksa", p.52.

<sup>5</sup> In "Progress", p.4, he recoils from the idea of preserving one's soul at all costs. The soul thus carefully saved may be a shrivelled thing. Better to lose one's soul gallantly and keep one's humanity, he says. Soul-saving meant selfishness to him; humanity denoted compassion. c.f. John 12:25

<sup>6</sup> See his study on saints in "Faith".

<sup>7</sup> "Thirteen Stories", p.184.

<sup>8</sup> "Success", p.76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.25.

".....did not cant about temptation and the weakness of the flesh, and above all, they never talked about their miserable souls or mourned their backslidings, knowing full well that they would slide again if the ice were slippery".

"Humbug" was continually on his lips as the one choice word of anathema above others. He did not want hypocrites redeemed. He wanted them damned. It does not seem to have occurred to him that Jesus Christ's great blast of condemnation was against hypocrisy (e.g. Mathew 6:1-16)

I think probably his final view of humanity was a mystery to himself. I agree with Paul Bloomfield when he says: "I can think of no secular writer who was more constantly and sensitively preoccupied with the rights and wrongs of human behaviour than Graham"<sup>2</sup>. He thinks of right and wrong as the fundamental, most meaningful choice in all life<sup>3</sup>. One would expect him to look for an eternal validation and authority for such choices. But equally with this concern which just falls short of a redemptive one, he seems to me to hold a strong love for unselfconscious life, the life which though not identified with, is yet not too far removed from that of the "other animals.....without whose co-operation in the Creator's scheme of things we would cease to be"<sup>4</sup>, as was that of the gaucho Froilan:

".....a pagan of the type of those who lived their lives in peace, before Mohammedanism and Christianity, and their mad, myriad sects, loomed on the world, and make men miserable, forcing them back upon themselves, making them introspective, and causing them to lose their time in thinking upon things which neither they, nor anyone in a ridiculous revolving world can ever solve, and losing thus the enjoyment of the sun, the silent satisfaction of listening to the storm, and all the joys which stir the natural man when the light breeze blows on his cheek as his horse gallops on the plain"<sup>5</sup>.

It is as if the loss in Eden is the eating of the fruit of self-conscious knowledge, and as if all that is left is a meaningless (in a final sense) yet important choice of right over against wrong. For the rest, the tensions, the contradictions patent to anyone who tries to make life add up - a shrug of the shoulders.

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<sup>1</sup> "Doughty Deeds", p.58.

<sup>2</sup> "The essential Cunninghame Graham", Introduction, p.21.

<sup>3</sup> "The Conquest of New Granada", p.247.

<sup>4</sup> "Cartagena and the Banks of the Simu", p.165.

<sup>5</sup> "Success", p.23.