

c. The Great Unknown - Death

Over Gabrielle's grave these words are written, at her husband's instance: "Los Muertes Abren Los Ojos A Los Que Viven" - the dead open the eyes of the living. Here is mystery. Investigation has disclosed no traditional rendering to fix the meaning. Does he intend "The dead are a reminder that we had better get on with the business of living - we will not live for ever?" - is this another form of Hezekiah's: "For the grave cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee; they that go down into the pit cannot hope for any truth?" It could mean, on the other hand, that Gabrielle and others like her had been given insight which was still instructing and inspiring the living - that they, being dead, were yet speaking. Yet again, these could be words of a larger hope. They immediately call to mind the opposite, customary practice - that of the living closing the eyes of the dead. May it not be that the dead are more alive than the living, and are at their right hand? By this kindly final act, we, as it were, write off our dead: may it not be that we ourselves would be written off, but for the dead who open our eyes?

Cunninghame Graham's works would suggest he thinks all of these thoughts.

He meditated much upon death, not in any morbid way, but with the realism of a man prepared to face facts. He liked to smoke a cigarette and give himself over to contemplation at Gabrielle's grave: this was his nearest approach to prayer. Admiral Sir Angus Cunninghame Graham has recorded in conversation his liking for attending every available funeral. He himself speaks of the good which comes from drives in funeral carriages, with the time they afford to wait attentively before the solemn fact of death¹.

Much of what he wrote suggests "While there's life, there's hope: but death is the end". His famous story "Beattock to Moffat" which contrasts the avoidance of the very thought of death, in case of ill omen, on the part of the English wife, with the matter-of-fact readiness, arrangements made for it by her dying Scots husband², underlines his own readiness to face the logic of this³. But the logic is bitter. When the hope of humanity is entrusted to "the possibly fallacious trumpet call"⁴, when all appearances run counter to words of promise, thus:

"Then he committed to the earth the dead man's body, certain as he averred, both of the resurrection and the life to come, and on the coffin fell the gritty soil, as if it mocked him by its blackness and its uncompromising grime"⁵

The loss makes life irreparably dark.

"In our drab-coloured world when a personality disappears it is as if, in sailing up the estuary of life, one of the fairways were suddenly put out. One has to grope one's way back to the wheelhouse and steer on, even more blindly than before"⁶.

¹ "Redeemed", p.165.

² "Success", p.149.

³ Other instances of the idea that death can be kept at bay by ignoring it are recorded in "Thirteen Stories", p.186; "Faith", p.82.

⁴ "Progress", p.284. cf. "Brought Forward", p.58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.197.

⁶ Obituary of Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Henry Arthur Fletcher, published December 28th 1925.

It seems "an impertinence of fate"¹. Death from natural causes? "Nothing is more unjust than is a natural cause"². The hurt was especially hard to bear when the immortal Conrad put on mortality.

Yet, writing in "Inveni Portam", he pictures gulls bringing Conrad in his grave tidings of the sea³. Again and again he reverts in his books to the idea of some link which still binds the dead in their graves to life and to one another. He liked the graveyards of Morocco, which men traversed on foot and on horseback - the presence of the living kept the dead from feeling lonely⁴. They may, after all, "perceive, with some new sense unknown to those who labour in the flesh, all that is passing....."⁵. It is as if he affirmed the Communion of Saints, but gave it a local earthly habitation.

The dead at times may be actively implicated in life, to his way of thinking. All that they did and were "compasses us about in subtle atmosphere"⁶. Past occupants still preside over houses, which others inhabit (I believe he specially had this sense at Gartmore)⁷. The land is possessed only by their favour⁸. In Rome he is overwhelmed with this feeling. He writes:

"The living seem to have been effaced and to have given place, as in fact they always must, to those who have become the real owners of the soil by mingling with it after death"⁹.

Do the dead rise? Not to a Christian Heaven as he understood it. What that implied to him is indicated when he muses on W H Hudson's death:

"Heaven, I know, would be too circumscribed and too conventional to make him happy, though he would listen with delight to the soft flutter of the angels' wings"¹⁰.

To some genuine freedom, he hopes. In one place he likens our lives to that of a butterfly in an inverted glass bowl. Life imprisons us - we discern wider horizons through the glass¹¹. In another, he muses thus on the dead:

".....is it really that I myself have gone, and they live on, deep down in the recesses of some fairy hill of which I am not free?"¹².

But ever and again it is to Trapalanda that he turns, the Heaven of the Indians, where water is plentiful, grass is sweet, and a man can hunt on horseback with no ache between his shoulder blades¹³. The nearest earth offered to heaven he found on the Pampas; ".....if heaven is heaven, it must surely be what we have loved on earth, a little

¹ Preface to "True Stories of the Past", by Martin Hume.

² Preface to "Queens of Old Spain", by Martin Hume.

³ Reproduced also in "Redeemed", p.171.

⁴ "Cartagena and the Banks of the Simu", p.233.

⁵ "Redeemed", p.68.

⁶ Obituary on Dr John Macintyre. "Glasgow Medical Journal", December 1928.

⁷ "Charity", p.136.

⁸ "Hope", p.63.

⁹ "Faith", p.160.

¹⁰ "The Horses of the Conquest". Preface, p. x.

¹¹ "Faith". Preface, p. xv. cf. "A Hitchment", p.143.

¹² "His People", p.219.

¹³ "Redeemed", p.80; "Cartagena and the Banks of the Simu", p.219 and passim.

sublimated", he argues¹. Trapalanda is mentioned more and more towards the end of his life. In the latter allusions there is a change of emphasis. He is less concerned to lay down conditions (of "Trootic's" imagined paradise, he had written "if it is not so, a plague on paradise"²); and he speaks more in hope than in mere longing.

Death puzzled and deprived him, but the reservation and detachment which formed one of his characteristic fronts to life prevented it from distressing him. Any Christian critique of his attitude must take account of the Biblical way in which he confronted its finality, and measure the utter inadequacy of human resources to deal with it; and, too, of his utter failure to think of resurrection in relation to Christ's resurrection. (".....now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept"). Allowance must be made for the fact that it was an escapist, compensating Heaven, empty of judgement on the tenor of human life, which he found preached by the churches.

What was left was to strive and hope, to live this life with integrity and leave its sequel uncomprehended:

"The promised land is always just ahead of us..... Heaven itself is far away, so placed, no doubt, by theologians and the wise fathers of the Church, who indeed made the path difficult and the wicket straight, so that the few who have passed in shall not return to tell us if indeed all is as we have been encouraged to believe"³.

¹ "Redeemed", p.10.

² "Notes on the District of Menteth", preface to third edition.

³ "The Conquest of the River Plate", p.108.