



CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM

CONTEMPORARY PORTRAITS

(THIRD SERIES)

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PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR

40 SEVENTH AVENUE
NEW YORK CITY

CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM

CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM, when I first saw him, was something more than a very handsome man: he was picturesque and had an air with him. He might have been the subject of a portrait by Zurbaran of some Spanish noble who had followed Cortès. As soon as I knew him I always called him to myself—El Conquistador. Graham was above middle height, of slight nervous strong figure, very well dressed, the waist even defined, with a touch of exoticism in loose necktie or soft hat; in coloring the reddish brown of a chestnut; the rufous hair very thick and upstanding; the brown beard trimmed to a point and floating moustache; the oval of the face a little long; the nose Greek; large blue eyes that could become inscrutable as agate or ingenuous, responsive; eyes at once keen, observant and reflective; both light and depth in them.

He was never taken for a dandy or merely a handsome gentleman; you felt a certain reserve in him of pride or perhaps of conscious intelligence; he was "some one," as the French say.

I noticed him first at a Socialist meeting. William Morris was there and Bernard Shaw, I think, and Champion, the ex-artillery officer, and Hyndman, the Marxian leader of the party in the mid-eighties. Graham had evidently not studied the economic question; but was en-

listed on the side of the poor and the workman, partly by a sense of justice, partly by an aristocratic disdain of riches and the unscrupulous greed that acquires riches.

"Why should we honor the wolves?" was his argument, "who break into the sheepfold and kill, not to satisfy their hunger, even; one could forgive them that; but out of blood-lust. Your rich contractor or banker is a mere blood-sucker; why tolerate him? Pay good watch dogs to protect you and kill the wolves as noxious brutes."

There was disdain of his audience in every word, in his attitude even; he had an artist's contempt for their lack of vision, an adventurer's scorn for their muddy, slow blood.

The next time I met him was riding in Hyde Park. It used to be said that nobody could ride in the Row who wasn't properly dressed, and by "properly" in England they mean conventionally—dark coat, dark trousers tightly strapped over patent boots. But Graham was in breeches and brown boots, as indeed I was; but then he wore a sombrero besides and was mounted on a mustang of many colors, with inordinately long mane and tail.

"Some circus rider," was one remark I heard made about him.

We came together naturally, as outlaws do; for I wanted to know why Graham rode a piebald, and he was eager, as every horse-lover, to extol the qualities of his mount. I found that, like Wilfred Scawen Blunt, the poet, who believed in the pure Arab strain, Graham believed in the speed of South American mustangs. I told him about Blunt and how he had imported some of the best-bred animals from the north of Africa. He had ar-

ranged a race with some ordinary English platers, and his Arab fliers had been ignominiously beaten.

Graham wouldn't believe it, and the end of it was we made up a race. We agreed to wait till one o'clock till most of the equestrians had gone home to lunch and then try our mounts up the Ladies' Mile. The horse I was riding was nearly thoroughbred, but only about 15½ hands high, so the match did not look unfair. But the English horse had a rare turn of speed and could do half a mile in about fifty seconds, something like racehorse pace. We told the inspector of police of our intention, and at once, Briton-like, he took a keen interest in the match, and said he would tell his men to keep the course clear.

When we came to Hyde Park Corner about one o'clock we found quite a little crowd; we started at a hand gallop and went down the slope side by side, the crowd cheering "Gryhim, Gryhim! Well done, Gri-im!" in strong Cockney accents. As we breasted the hill I slid forward, crouching on the pad, and gave my horse his head, and at once we left Graham as if he had been standing still. When I drew up at the railings, I was some 200 yards ahead.

"You were right," said Graham courteously: "I'd never have believed it. I'm just as much astonished as you say Blunt was; but you don't ride a bit like a cowboy; where did you get that jockey seat?"

"I'm rather ashamed of it," I replied. "I always rode all the races for our Kansas bunch as a boy on the trail. I was the lightest, and I soon found out that the further forward I got on the withers, the easier it was for my

horse. But you ride like a Centaur, with easy swaying balance, like the figures on a Greek frieze. I fall naturally into the professional way of doing everything. I suppose it is my intense combativeness; anyway, I'm a little ashamed of it sometimes."

"Why should you be?" he replied courteously. "I imagine it is the desire in you to excel; and what better desire could a man have?"

"It is the desire to excel," I answered, "carried to such an extent that one is careless of grace or comfort. I sometimes think I should have been better without the American 'speeding-up'."

That race made us friends, for Graham came to lunch with me, and we swapped stories for hours, he telling of the Pampas of the Argentine and Uruguay, giving weird word-pictures of that Spanish and Indian civilization, and I of the trail three thousand miles long that ran from Laramie and the Platte river down through Kansas and Texas to the Rio Grande:

"The old trail, the wide trail, the trail that the
buffalo made."

We had many points of contact; we were both outlaws by nature; both eager to live to the uttermost, preferring life to any transcript of it. Moreover, though he knew Spanish and the religious-romantic Spanish nature far more intimately than I did, and revealed himself in his love of it, yet I too had been attracted by Spain and had learned something of its life and literature, just as he had got to know a good deal about America.

His deep and intimate understanding of the Spanish people had freed him from the narrow English self-appreciation by discovering to him the hard materialism of the Anglo-Saxon nature. Every now and then words fell from him and can be found even in his stories that show this detachment:

"Does any Englishman really respect a woman in his heart?" he asked one day, and I could not but smile, for the same question had come to me so often that I had had to answer it. It is the exceptional man of any race who really esteems the feminine mind and spirit. We reach a certain point in growth where the way is closed to us unless we begin to trust our intuitions and act on them as women do. Then first we begin really to respect women. And as Englishmen like consistency of character and strength better than width of vision and distrust change, without which growth is impossible, comparatively few Englishmen ever reach reverence for what differs from their essentially masculine ideal. Graham felt all this much as I did.

Then, too, he was sceptical of the much-vaunted modern "progress." He saw that the enormous growth of wealth due in the main to man's conquest of nature had increased and not lessened social inequality, and especially the inequality of condition. "The poor today are on the starvation line," he used to cry indignantly, "while the rich are portentously richer than ever before." His sense of justice was shocked and his vein of pessimism deepened by this observation. He did not see that all readjustments take time, centuries even, and, after all,

centuries are only moments in the soul's growth. I was attracted by his clearness of vision, and above all by his courageous acceptance of all he did see. Graham had no wish to hoodwink himself, and that was a tie between us.

If he had ever been a student and had submitted to the training of a German university we might have been still more alike; but Graham had always had a silver-gilt spoon in his mouth; he had always had money and position and had learned what he liked and left unlearned what did not appeal to him, and that privileged position has its inevitable drawbacks:

“Who never ate his bread with tears,
He knows you not, you heavenly powers.”

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The next time I saw Graham was at a meeting in Trafalgar Square in defense of free speech. I forget what the occasion was; but he was there with John Burns and I think Shaw, and was cheered to the echo. No finer or more characteristic pair than he and Burns could be imagined; his slight figure and handsome face showed the aristocrat at his best, and Burns with his square powerful form and strong leonine head, was the very model of a workingman. Shaw, a sort of Mephisto in appearance, but certainly a man of genius, did not fit in any category. But Graham's gallantry and Burns' resolve and Shaw's talent were all nullified by the brute force of the police. The end of the scrimmage was that Burns, Graham and half a dozen others spent the night in a police cell on some hypocritical charge of obstructing the traffic.

And next morning all the middle-class papers spoke with contempt and disgust of both men, the editors never dreaming that the one was soon to be a Cabinet Minister, while the other belonged to a still higher class.

The next meeting with Graham that made an impression on me was in the House of Commons. In the interval Graham had become a member of the House, and his reception enabled me to judge it from an altogether new angle.

"Every man finds his true level in the House of Commons," is a favorite shibboleth of the English. I had always doubted it and often argued about it with Sir Charles Dilke, who, by virtue of his French training, was peculiarly fairminded.

"The House," I said, "is made up of fourth-form schoolboys with a leaven of men of talent. They want to be fair and are fair to ordinary men; they might even be fair to a man of genius provided he had great parliamentary or oratorical power; but the highest form of genius would have a sorry reception there and a hard time of it."

Dilke would never admit it.

"How do you account for the way they took to Bradlaugh?" he asked.

"After treating him for years like a knave," I replied, "they came to recognize at long last his high courage and noble character, chiefly because he had strong English prejudices, was an individualist and staunch believer in the rights of property; in other words, high character, great fighting power and second-rate intelligence won

their hearts in the long run. But the long contest broke Bradlaugh, and he died untimely in the hour of triumph."

"Then what do you say of Tim Healy?" Dilke persisted; "he's clever enough, God knows, and has no English prejudices. How do you account for his success?"

"He's not very successful," I retorted; "even now, after twenty odd years of striving; but take Lord Hugh Cecil; he has everything the English like; great name and place; he stands, too, for all the English household gods; believes in property, in the oligarchy, is unaffectedly religious and goes to church twice every Sunday; and yet because he has a streak of genius in him they won't have him. They give his dull brother, Lord Robert Cecil, place and power; but they keep Lord Hugh at a distance. The English simply hate and fear genius. To them it is an unforgivable sin, and that's why their houses will be left unto them desolate."

Dilke wouldn't have it, yet Cunninghame Graham came to the House and the House wouldn't listen to him; simply gave him, or rather gave themselves, no chance. Of course, he made all sorts of blunders. Every one is listened to in the House of Commons the first time he speaks; a maiden speech takes precedence of all others, and so able men, as a rule, make their maiden effort in some great debate, where they are sure of a large audience. Graham, conscious probably of great powers, wasted this opportunity, and afterwards he would have had to make himself known to the Speaker by constantly speaking to empty benches, and even then would have

had to get up half a dozen times on any important occasion before he could "catch the Speaker's eye," as the phrase goes. But whenever he prepared, he tried in vain to catch the Speaker's eye, and when by assiduity he got a chance, the waiting and the rebuffs had taken the steam out of him. And yet he was an admirable speaker at his best, just as he was and is a most excellent writer.

How good a writer he was I learned soon after I took the editorship of *The Saturday Review* in 1894. He came in and told me of a recent visit he had made to Spain and Africa and how he had enjoyed the art of the Prado and the wild, free life in Morocco.

"I've brought you a little sketch of an incident," he said, handing me a manuscript, "if you care to use it."

"Surely," I replied at once; "I'll be delighted; I'm certain I shall have a treat." And so strongly had Graham's personality affected me that I did feel certain he would do noteworthy work.

After he left I found I could not read his handwriting, a dreadful spidery scrawl, so I sent the sketch to the printer and when I read it in print I was charmed. Graham, it was clear, was a born writer of the best; very simple, without a trace of pose or mannerism or effort, getting all his effects by some daring image or splash of color—a strange trait of character or weird peculiarity of mind—and above all by a spiritual sense of the intimate relation between persons and scenes, as if the Gaucho's mind had some of the vagueness and empty void of the Pampas and as if his soul was like that Southern atmosphere, subject to sudden rare storms of

singular violence. Graham paints like one of the school of Goya, a Zuloaga, for instance, who has been touched by French influence.

I remember one occasion that proved his genius as a writer triumphantly. One evening I heard that William Morris had died. Next day Arthur Symons asked me to let him write on Morris' poetry; a little later Shaw blew in with the declaration that he wanted to write on Morris as a Socialist.

"All right," I agreed; "but stretch yourself, for Graham will describe the funeral, and his stuff'll be hard to beat."

Shaw grinned; he, too, knew that Graham was a master.

When the articles came in both Shaw's and Symons' were most excellent, but Graham's had abiding value, was indeed literature and not journalism at all. He merely described what had happened; the meeting of a dozen famous men at the train, the dreary walk from the station to the cottage, and then the following the coffin to the grave and the wordless parting. He told how the few flowers wilted and cringed in the bleak wind and how eloquent men were content to exchange glances and hand-clasps and part in silence. Every sentence seemed to drag heavy with grief, and there was a sense of unshed tears and the unspeakable tragedy of death in the very quietude of the undistinguished ending.

A great writer, is Cunninghame Graham! Three or four of his best stories will live with the best of Kipling.

One later impression: I met him at an evening party

in 1912, I think, in the house of a Spaniard named Triano, the Envoy or Ambassador from some Spanish South American State.

I had not seen Graham for perhaps fifteen years; he had altered indefinitely. His hair was sprinkled with gray; the slight figure was as well set up and alert as ever; but the fine coloring had faded and the light of the eyes was dimmed; he had grown old, the spring of hope had left him.

The Spanish setting suited him, brought out his dignity and fine courtesy; he spoke Spanish like a native who was also a man of genius, and our host took delight in praising him to me as the only Briton he had ever met who might be mistaken for a Spaniard—un hidalgo—an aristocrat; he hastened to add: He's a great writer, too; isn't he?

"Yes," I replied, a little hesitatingly, and then the word came to me, the true word, I think, "Graham's an amateur of genius."

"That's it!" cried Triano, delightedly. "I know just what you mean. He does not take his work seriously, doesn't use the file on every phrase, seeking perfection; he's a little heedless and his success haphazardous, eh? His true *métier* is that of a gentleman-courtier; he should have been English ambassador at the Court of Madrid."

When I talked to Graham that evening I found him saddened. The sense of the transitoriness of life was heavy on him:

"Where are they all?" he asked; "the old reviewers?"

McCull, Runciman, Max, Shaw and the rest; do you ever see them?"

"From time to time," I replied. "Shaw is married, you know, and Max, too; Runciman is dead, Wells lives in Essex; and McCull at the Tate Gallery; we are all more settled and none of us getting younger. . . ."

"None of us," he said, sighing; "how fast life streams past! Are you as eager as ever?"

"I think so," I answered. "I look forward as hopefully as I did at sixteen; indeed, I believe I'm more eager, more hopeful, certainly more firmly resolved than I was as a young man."

"I wish I could say as much," sighed Graham; "life's worth while, of course; but it hasn't the glamor and magic it used to have, and the younger generation aren't very interesting, are they?"

"Some of them interest me hugely," I said; "there's Middleton Murry, with the *Rhythm* he edits, and a young sculptor, Gaudier-Brzeska, and Augustus John and Ferguson and Jimmy Pryde and Lovat Fraser—all gifted, all likely to do big things. . . ."

"I don't know any of them," he said; "where are they to be found? How young you keep!" and then, "Where are you living now?"

Somehow or other this meeting and Graham's sadness made me ask a friend of his a day or two later how Graham lived: whether he was hard up?

"Hard up?" exclaimed our friend; "he has ten thousand a year at least; but he's a Scot and thrifty; 'near,' we call it."

The incident showed me how little I knew of Graham; how reticent he was or proud with that curious secretive pride which is so Scotch and so Spanish.

Graham's stories are almost unknown in these United States, and yet I fancy they would be popular or at least keenly appreciated by the few who know how to read; for good readers are almost as scarce as good writers.

Here, for example, is a picture taken from La Pampa, a story in a book entitled "Charity," that he gave me in 1912:

"Grave and bearded men reined in their horses, their ponchos suddenly clinging to their sides, just as a boat's sail clings around the mast when it has lost the wind."

Or take this portrait of Si Taher, an Arab mystic, half fanatic, half madman:

"Brown and hard-looking, as if cut out of walnut wood; with a beard so thick it looked more like a setting than a beard, though it was flecked with grey. . . His thin and muscular body, which his *haik* veiled, but did not hide, showed glimpses of his legs and arms, hairy as the limbs of an orang-outang. His feet were shod with sandals of undressed camel's skin. His strong and knotted hands looked like the roots of an old oak, left bare above the ground, both in their size and make. He always carried in his hand a staff of argan wood, which use and perspiration had polished like a bone."

Or, in the same book, his picture of his "Aunt Eleanor," almost unquotable, for every line of the ten pages has a new touch that adds to the versimilitude of the portrait. Take these paragraphs:

“Tall, thin and willowy, and with a skin like parchment, which gave her face, when worked upon by a slight rictus in the nose she suffered from, a look as of a horse about to kick; she had an air, when you first saw her, almost disquieting, it was so different from anything or anybody that you had ever met. She never seemed to age. . . . Perhaps it was her glossy dark-brown hair, which, parted in the middle and kept in place by a thin band of velvet, never was tinged with grey, not even in extreme old age, that made her very young.

“Her uniform, for so I styled it, it was so steadfast, was, in the winter, a black silk, sprigged, as she would have said herself, with little trees, and in the summer, on fine days, a lilac poplin, which she called ‘laylock’, surmounted by a Rampore Chudda immaculately white. . .”

In the same quiet way he tells how the old lady loved horses and rode to hounds, even in extreme old age, and then finally of her death after she had made all arrangements for her funeral and given all the necessary orders, and this by way of epitaph:

“My aunt rests quietly under some elm trees in Old Milverton churchyard.

“Many old Scottish ladies lie round about the grave where my aunt sleeps under a granite slab, now stained a little with the weather, imparting to the churchyard a familiar air, as of the tea-parties that she once used to give, when they all sat together, just as they now lie closely in the ground, to keep each other warm. The rooks caw overhead, and when the hounds pass on a bright November morning I hope she hears them, for heaven

would be to her but a dull dwelling-place if it contained no horses and no hounds."

In all these stories the painter's eye and a superb painter's talent. Graham has also done one or two sketches of Paris life, notably "Un Monsieur," which de Maupassant would gladly have signed; but in spite of their mastery, his best work is found in pictures of Spanish South America or of Scotland, the land of his heart and home.

Graham's latest collection of tales, entitled "Brought Forward," just published by Stokes & Company, of New York, at one dollar and thirty-five cents, does not contain any of his best work.

Graham himself appears to have felt this, for he writes a "Preface" to this book, in which he takes leave of his readers and bids them forever farewell.

"Hold it not up to me for egotism, O gentle reader, for I would have you know that hardly any of the horses that I rode had shoes on them, and thus the tracks are faint. Vale."

Eight or nine small volumes hold the entire legacy; in half a dozen short stories you have the soul and quintessence of the gallant gentleman who in life was Cunningham Graham. The tracks he left are faint, he tells you; the record of his sixty or seventy years could all go in one little booklet; but the final account is not to be made up in this way.

He was born to wealth and place, dowered with perfect health and great personal charm; tempted as only such a man is, he might have been forgiven if he had

chosen the primrose way and lazied through life relishing all the flowers and tasting all the sweets. Instead of that, he left his caste and spoke and wrote and worked for the poor and the outcast and the dispossessed. He braved the scorn and hatred of men when he might easily have enjoyed their applause and honor. He faced blows and indignities and imprisonment when he could have reckoned on welcome as a distinguished guest in Courts and Throne-rooms; by choice he took the martyr's way and gave the best of his life to the meanest of his fellows.

And I hold Graham the higher because he made the supreme sacrifice, not in rags and dirt, as the saints selected, still less as one seeking insults and scars, but as a courtly gentleman making light of his good deeds and mocking overwrought pretensions, passing through life with a gay smile and reckless gesture as if it were proper for a man to live for others and to die for them, if need be, and for Justice without the faintest hope of reward.

And so I echo my friend's "Farewell," even though I hope to see him again, for his gallant bearing and courage and talent formed part of the pageantry and splendor of life to all of us, and the ease of his accomplishment as an artist more than atoned for the little carelessnesses in craft of this amateur of genius who was at the same time a most delightful friend and absolutely faithful to his high calling.