

CHAPTER XVII

GRANT ALLEN

THERE died last October a most remarkable man who enjoyed the privilege of considerable distinction both in science and in literature. He was perhaps unequalled as a popularizer of science; and he was certainly unequalled in versatility. I mean Grant Allen. This man has had his influence on English thought—you will often find references to him. You will find that the religious and conservative publications generally try to belittle him,—to suggest that he was only a novelist and a man of letters. But on the other hand, you will find him highly spoken of by Herbert Spencer, by Bain, the author of “The Emotions and the Will”, by James Sully, a psychologist of great eminence, and by men of science at large. The reason that Grant Allen has not been given as large a place is merely because he had new ideas, and offended the churches and offended English prejudices. Of course you know that it is almost impossible to express new ideas in England without offending prejudice of some kind; and if the prejudice happens to be religious the opposition and the abuse become very strong. Had Allen been a rich man, he could have laughed at all this. It is not good to preach new ideas in England unless you are rich. Nearly all the great names of the evolutionary philosophy represent men independent of money, and therefore independent of society. Darwin was comfortably rich; Spencer was always independent. So were Wallace, Maudsley, and the great mathematicians and chemists who availed themselves of their knowledge to the encouragement of new philosophy. Huxley was poor; and if he had not been a man of immense intellectual power and of very strong constitution, he never could have succeeded. Now Grant Allen had something of the same kind of talent as Huxley, though

in a much less degree; but he did not have Huxley's tough body and iron nerves. The English nation tried to keep him in a condition of dependence—would have starved him to death if they could. As a matter of fact he seems to have died from overwork. But he has left his mark upon the thought of the time; and he has influenced literature forcibly in certain directions. Altogether I think he is well worth being the subject of a lecture; for there is no man of the same class whom I could more warmly recommend you to read.

Grant Allen was born in Canada in the year 1848; and was educated in Canada until he reached the age of 14. He was then sent to England, and eventually to Oxford University. There he distinguished himself very greatly—obtaining several different honours. Being poor he had to choose a profession early, and he attempted very successfully that of a teacher. He was Master of Composition at Brighton College for some years; then he was made Professor of Literature in the Government College at Jamaica (West Indies), and very shortly after he was appointed President of the college. Thus everything looked very favourable for him; but suddenly the English government decided to discontinue its support of the Jamaica University. Grant Allen returned to London; and he could not wait for years in order to obtain another equally good position. He had to do something; and he tried to support himself by authorship. He was a trained man of science—loving science even more than literature; and he was a disciple of Herbert Spencer. His first wish was to live by writing scientific books. He wrote a number of them,—all of which are very good of their kind, and all of which attracted considerable attention from persons of culture. These books, however, could not bring him an income sufficient to live upon. The cultured classes are not numerous enough to make scientific writings a good source of revenue. So, to his life-long regret, he was obliged to give up science and to write novels and stories for a living. After obtaining considerable success

by the production of about twenty remarkable novels, he issued a series of historical guide books, — the best of their kind ever made. In the midst of this success, death struck him down. I must tell you, however, that at no time did he actually give up scientific study. When he was first obliged to write stories he tried to write only scientific stories; and he would never have written any others if this class of literature could have been made really popular. And just before his death he issued a large volume of philosophy, “The Evolution of the Idea of God”. The book was altogether in advance of the time, and aroused a good deal of religious prejudice. But it is a good book; and no impartial person can read it without profit.

Now I want to tell you something about a very curious work which this man produced. He wrote about ten volumes of scientific essays of the most extraordinary interest and most original conception. Perhaps the best known of these is his volume entitled “The Colour-Sense”, — because it was published in the English and Foreign Philosophical Library. This was followed by “Physiological Æsthetics”, — perhaps the most original of all his productions. Besides these I may quote the titles of “The Evolutionist at Large” “Colin Clout’s Calendar”, “Post-Prandial Philosophy”, “Falling in Love, with other Essays on More Exact Branches of Science,” “The Evolution of the Idea of God”. Besides this mass of purely scientific work, he wrote the best life of Darwin in existence. A volume entitled “Strange Stories” might also be added to the list, for all these stories are all, or nearly all, scientific stories. As for his other class of production, perhaps it is enough to say that he wrote some twenty novels of which “The Woman who Did” made a great sensation and something of a scandal both in America and England. All the novels are good, but they do not rise to the highest rank of fiction. They were simply clever, interesting and likely stories written to make money. Therefore our literary consideration of Grant Allen cannot include a commentary upon most of his novel writing: we must consider him

chiefly as a philosopher and an essayist. Here he is great.

His greatness lies in one direction only,—but a very important one: in scientific imagination of the constructive kind. Famous discoveries in all branches of science have been made by the use of this faculty. Its best expression is in the essay; and the whole of Grant Allen's scientific works are collections of essays written in a style of great clearness and force. The papers upon the colour-sense are not mere explanations of the meaning of colour; they are attempts to teach us how and why the sense of colour was developed in man and in the animal kingdom. You must have heard that there is a theory to the effect that the power to perceive different colours was not in ancient times what it is now;—some people suppose that red was the first colour that could be perceived; then yellow; then green; lastly blue. Without adopting this theory, the author of the book in question not only establishes the relations of each colour to human necessity, but he also presents some new hypotheses which make one think, and which still receive very favourable scientific consideration. But it is in "Physiological *Æsthetics*"—really a fine development of Spencer's chapter on *Æstho-Physiology*;—that the power of scientific imagination is best shown. The book is a series of essays upon the meaning of pleasure and pain, and upon the reason of agreeable and disagreeable sensations of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. This is a most delightful book; and it was in this book that Spencer himself recognized some true discoveries in regard to evolutionary physiology. We smell a flower, for example, and we like the odour. But why do we like it—why should it be agreeable? We see a colour that pleases us, or we see a colour that disgusts us. For the reason of the disgust we need little explanation; but why should we like one colour more than another? Or take the question of sound. One kind of sound may be, although low, very disagreeable; another, although equally low, very pleasant. But why? No person before Grant Allen had made any attempt to answer

these questions in detail, — although Spencer had indicated how they might be answered. Since the appearance of Grant Allen's book, however, a German physiologist named G. M. Schneider has published several books upon the subject. He has only, however, carried out Grant Allen's theories upon a large scale. The two volumes entitled "Colin Clout's Calendar" and "The Evolutionist at Large" include essays upon an immense variety of common subjects considered in an astonishing new way. The first book is chiefly about plants; and represents the application of evolutionary philosophy to botany. Why should one kind of flower have six petals, another only five? Why should some flowers be of one colour, some of several different colours? Why should such a blossom as that of the daisy have a great number of petals, arranged like rays? These questions are the subjects of the essays, and they are admirably answered. The great lesson of these two books on botany was to teach people how much more interesting wild flowers are than cultivated flowers. Garden flowers such as roses, pinks, tulips, never again seem interesting after a scientific study of the wild flowers; for you recognize that the garden flowers are really unnatural monsters, created by man, whereas every wild flower has a wonderful story to tell to the scientific eye. And another charm of these books is that they are not written in technical language; no botanical names are given—because the object is to explain a general law, not to classify or to tire the memory. Besides, there are very curious essays upon the special senses of insects, upon the instincts of birds, upon the habits of such creatures as ants or spiders, which we see everyday, and think we know; but which the writer teaches us that we do not know. Perhaps the above four books include the very best of the shorter essays; but the other volumes mentioned are certainly very instructive. The "Post-Prandial Philosophy" deals considerably with social facts;—the explanation of certain kinds of character as belonging to certain classes of society and why; the book entitled "Falling in Love" is a miscel-

lany including sociological, historical, paleontological, and other essays. It is not too much to say that the author has written upon about one hundred different scientific subjects, — always interesting and sometimes like a genius. The whole worth of what he has done cannot, however, be estimated now. New discoveries may confirm some of his opinions and may prove others to be false, but whatever mistakes he may have fallen into he must be regarded as one of the few men of the time who was able to give new thoughts to everybody who could read them. These new thoughts have suggested a great deal to other men of letters. From that plan many small men have learned how to write a good scientific story; for his own scientific stories are among the best of their kind; they were collected together under the title of “Strange Stories,” and they show as much a variety in a certain way as the scientific essays did. A delightful habit of this writer was to take up a theory about the future man, the golden age to come, and then scientifically pull it to pieces. For example you will remember a theory that in a perfect state of society a deformed or weakly child should not be allowed to live. Prof. Huxley proved the folly of this theory some years ago; but Grant Allen taught the fact in the form of a story. He says, “Let us suppose the state of society that you imagine and now consider the consequence of the law.” After reading the “Child of the Phalanstery” you do not wish to hear any more of the theory. Possessing a fine gift of irony the writer of these stories was a good deal misunderstood by very dull people. For example, no intelligent mind was ever in the least offended by “The Woman who Did”, but a great many stupid people were offended by it because they could not understand the splendid irony of the whole story. They took it seriously. The story is about a young girl, graduate of Girton College, and a University student, both of whom have absorbed some of the wild notions about social reform that were circulated some years ago. For example, they have got it into their heads that the marriage

laws are not necessary; and that they should try to set a good example by living together as man and wife without any law. Grant Allen's story only shows the natural and terrible consequences of such a decision in English society. After reading that book, I think the wildest advocates of abolition of the marriage laws are likely to remain silent for 100 years.