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The Elephant in the Moon

Dr. Geo W. Ryan's Informal

by Prof. E.M. Brown

Everybody knows that this is an age of science and scientific method. We cannot be mistaken about it. For there is loud proclamation of it in the streets and on the house tops, and much trumpeting of the fact up and down the land. It meets your eye among the familiar crimes of the morning papers, obtrudes itself upon you during the busy hours of the day, dances through the mazes of your dreams and disturbs the quiet of your Sunday pew.

Now science, mark you, is something quite different from knowledge. That old-fashioned word of common place use and weak signification has been quite put out of the field by its sprightly young rival. But it is not the place here to enter the lists in defense of either of these vocables. so important a question, we may be sure, will not long escape the attention of the wide-eyed editor of that monthly budget of sensationalism – *The North American Review*. The settlement of the matter may therefore be left to the stout champions who will undoubtedly soon appear arrayed on either hand for dire battle before the eyes of half a continent.

But I am no enemy of science, so-called and would much rather sing a pean in her praise, if I only had proper lungs than detract in the smallest degree from her honors and dignities. And why not, are we all not, deeply sensible of the great blessings bestowed upon us by this new goddess? Is she not invoked by parturient mothers instead of the ancient Lucina, whose altars are no longer fragrant? Does she not attend the steps of the little child, keeping at bay Death and pale Diseases and all the thousand ills that dog his heels, smoothing away every molehill, even, along the road he has to travel, and, after lengthening his life far beyond the allotted span, does she not finally close his eyes painlessly at the end? Of course there must be temples and altars and statues and brass tablets and no end of wax candles and incense for such merit, but in the midst of all this deserved adoration of the new divinity may not be old gods, whose nostrils are no longer tickled with the smoke of sacrifice, be stirred up to proper vengeance against an impious and conceited generation, forgetful of earlier guidance and protection? The world and human nature is very old. There are other things that go to make up the sum of content and happiness aside from the satisfaction of physical wants. How far may science expect to supply the whole demand? Men have had a strange way of solacing themselves for centuries in the midst of bad drainage and wretched habitations, without waterworks or electric lights, by spinning wonderful webs of fancy out of their own heads, or [] with delight what the boundless fancy of others had spread before them. What substitute shall the new goddess offer for this, or how will she conduct

herself in this domain? The method must, of course, remain the same. Absolute accuracy of observation must take the place of intuition, correctness of detail must be observed without regard to the general effect. The lace upon the sleeve must be painted with the microscope instead of bold lines and character drawing, but there be minute dissection and analysis. Take the scalpel in hand and separate every minutest part of the spiritual organism; show, or try to show, every spring of action, the whole conflicting network of petty thoughts that go to make up a resolution from the psychological standpoint; bring the magnifying glass to bear upon them and multiply each weak desire, or fleeting purpose, some thousands of times and make it look prodigious, monstrous and full of evil potent; tell the reader that this is the fellow, this the bacillus that causes all the trouble, you have succeeded in isolating him by proper culture and here he is. Tremble wretch, for such propagators of disease are in your own mind. Do not think to escape their attacks. Nothing but constant introspection will save you. In this manner modern romances and even poems are made up with infinite pains, based on the unassailable foundation of a stack of note-books, and a record of minute observations, sufficient to satisfy the demands of a learned society. But do not venture to suggest that these things may not after all be literature. There are a number of vicious critics who will be upon your back in a twinkling. To describe, if you must know and there is no other way of really knowing. No doubt that Shakespeare had a large number of notebooks, if they had not all been destroyed unfortunately in those frequent fires we read of. As for Fielding, let him go packing with his Tom Jones. He was but a lewd fellow anyway, and if his creator had but possessed a little training or method he might have given us some very constructive psychological analysis instead of getting his hero into one scrape after another for the pleasure of getting him out again.

In earlier, I will not say better, days that these, when science was still modest and poets, for their ancient right, permitted themselves a certain arrogance of bearing toward the young stranger, the satirical author of Hudibras undertook to serve up the gentleman of the Royal Society in a famous poem. These were the men of science, precursors of a long line of illustrious investigators, are represented as busily engaged in observing through a telescope the familiar face of the moon, as she rode high in heaven, turning her broad countenance full to view. Suddenly one savant utters a cry of astonishment and gives place to another, lest forsooth, his eyes may have deceived him. One after another they gaze in turn with trembling wonder, for there is a most singular object in the field, a monstrous discovery has been made; there is, yes, beyond question there is an elephant in the moon. What need to say how closely they watched the strange creature, with careful note they took of every limb and feature as the great beast moved about pasturing upon the extinct craters of the lunar surface. Beyond question they had accumulated materials enough for a whole volume of proceedings with which to astonish the learned world, and were meditating how to get the start of one another in publishing it, so as to secure the fame and honor of the discovery,

each one for himself, when a sudden and remarkable cavorting of the huge animal lead to a more careful examination of the instrument and the humiliating truth forced itself upon them that what they had taken for an elephant was only a poor little mouse caught between the lenses of the telescope.

The application of this half-forgotten satire of King Charles time to the matter in hand will you not trouble me to make. Glorious be science and may she make us all as comfortable as possible? But in matters of literature let us hope she may see the errors of her ways and be content with that secure and solid renown which she won at the hands of the elder Darwin when he reduced the whole science of Botany to an epic poem.

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