

16 May, 1896

The Saturday Review.

509

REVIEWS.

AN OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS.

"An Outcast of the Islands." By Joseph Conrad. London: T. Fisher Unwin. 1896.

LAST year there was published an East Indian romance, "Almayer's Folly," which was praised, it is to be feared, rather more than it was read. Reviewer after reviewer hailed the new writer more or less pithily, promised him a brilliant future, and thought no more of the matter. "Mr. Conrad," said the "Daily Chronicle," thumbs up, so to speak. "Mr. Conrad may go on." "We have been struck by the book." "He will find his public, and he deserves his place." And Mr. Conrad has availed himself of this generous permission, and has gone on—to a remarkably fine romance indeed. One fault it has, and a glaring fault; and that one may deal with first, and put aside to proceed to the more grateful enterprise of praise. Mr. Conrad is wordy; his story is not so much told as seen intermittently through a haze of sentences. His style is like river-mist; for a space things are seen clearly, and then comes a great grey bank of printed matter, page on page, creeping round the reader, swallowing him up. You stumble, you protest, you blunder on, for the drama you saw so cursorily has hold of you; you cannot escape until you have seen it out. You read fast, you run and jump, only to bring yourself to the knees in such mud as will presently be quoted. Then suddenly things loom up again, and in a moment become real, intense, swift.

Here, to get this painful part over, is Mr. Conrad at his worst. In Chapter iii. of Part V. he wishes to show us the intolerable boredom of Willems, the outcast, left alone, satiated, in Lakamba's deserted settlement, with the woman he loved so passionately. He has to give us a glimpse of the savage woman's aching perplexity at this changed demeanour, and of her gleam of happiness when for a moment he tried to relieve his tedium by blowing at the whitened ashes of his passion. Indisputably, Mr. Conrad has imagined it all; for if you feel about in this chapter, however hastily and eager, grasping the tangible facts, and letting the haze drive by you, you will, after an interval, see quite distinctly the pathetic beauty of the episode he has conceived. And this is how he begins: "On Lingard's departure solitude and silence closed round Willems." This apparently misses the effect sought, because of the turn of the phrase—"closed" cripples the idea of being derelict almost as much as if one spoke of a man being thickly swathed in isolation. Silence and solitude do not close round any one; they sit down afar off and watch. So much Mr. Conrad seems to have felt, and to modify it he adds, "The cruel silence of one abandoned by men," and still dissatisfied proceeds, "the reproachful silence which surrounds an outcast rejected by his kind." But there is something unsatisfactory about that silence, and the only remedy within Mr. Conrad's reach seems to be more words; so "the silence unbroken by the slightest whisper of hope," and then, getting angry, "an immense, an impenetrable silence, that swallows up without echo the murmur of regret and the cry of revolt." And having given the battered silence its unsatisfactory quietus with this, Mr. Conrad leaves it. The curious thing is that this trampling army corps of dependent clauses, this silence correcting silence, leaves no impression of silence at all. For ten pages altogether does Mr. Conrad toil away, multiplying words. Here is a sample chosen haphazard, which, indeed, might almost serve as a criticism of him in itself:—"His wandering feet stumbled against the blackened brands of extinct fires, kicking up a light black dust of cold ashes that flew in drifting clouds and settled to leeward" (naturally enough) "on the fresh grass sprouting from the hard ground, between the shade trees. He moved on, and on; ceaseless, unresting, in widening circles, in zig-zagging paths that led to no issue; and the marks of his footsteps, pressed deep into the soft mud of the bank, were filled slowly behind him" (not in front, mind you) "by the percolating water of the rising river, caught the light, and shone in a chain of small re-

flected suns along the broad expanse of black slime, of the dull and quivering mire where he struggled on, objectless, unappeased; struggled on wearily with a set, distressed face behind which, in his tired brain, seethed his thoughts: restless, sombre, tangled, chilling, horrible and venomous, like a nestful of snakes."

Notice here how the one finely expressive symbol of the shining footsteps is lost in this dust-heap of irrelevant words, and in particular how the last eleven words, with that needless inappropriate image of snakes, rob the whole of its last vestige of effect. It never seems to occur to Mr. Conrad to put forth his effect and leave it there stark and beautiful; he must needs set it and explain it, and refer to it, and thumb and maul it to extinction; and it never seems to dawn upon him that, if a sentence fails to carry the full weight and implication it was meant to do, the remedy is not to add a qualifying clause, but to reject it and try another. His sentences are not unities, they are multitudinous tandems, and he has still to learn the great half of his art, the art of leaving things unwritten.

Now all this is set down without any desire of detraction. It is the least any one must say who is setting out to give Mr. Conrad his meed of praise as a romancer. After all this has been said, one can still apply superlatives to the work with a conscience void of offence. Subject to the qualifications thus disposed of, "An Outcast of the Islands" is, perhaps, the finest piece of fiction that has been published this year, as "Almayer's Folly" was one of the finest that was published in 1895. It is hard to understand how the respectable young gentlemen from the Universities who are engaged in cutting out cheaper imitations of the work of Mr. Stanley Weyman and Mr. Anthony Hope can read a book like this and continue in that industry. Think of the respectable young gentleman from the University, arrayed in his sister's hat, fichu, rationals, and cycling gauntlets, flourishing her hat-pin, and pretending, in deference to the supposed requirements of Mr. Mudie's public, to be the deuce and all of a taverning mediæval blade, and compare him with Willems the Outcast, late confidential clerk to Hudig & Co. Here you have (a little pruned of words) the picture of Willems in his glory:—

"In the afternoon he expanded his theory of success over the little tables, dipping now and then his moustaches in the crushed ice of the cocktails; in the evening he would hold forth, cue in hand, to a younger listener, across the billiard-table. *The billiard balls stood still as if listening also*, under the vivid brilliance of the shaded lamps. . . . Through the big windows the salt dampness of the sea, the vague smell of mould and flowers, drifted in and mingled with the odour of lamp-oil. . . . Willems would win the game, he would say a patronizing 'Good night,' and step out into the long empty street. He would walk in the middle, his shadow gliding obsequiously before him. He looked down on it complacently. The shadow of a successful man! He would be slightly dizzy with cocktails and his own glory. . . . As he often told people, he came East fourteen years ago, a cabin-boy. A small boy. His shadow must have been very small at that time. . . . And now he was looking at the shadow of the confidential clerk of Hudig & Co. going home. . . . He had not done himself justice out there; he had not talked enough, not impressed his hearers enough. Never mind. Some other time. Now he would go home and make his wife get up and listen to him. . . . A man of his stamp could carry off anything, do anything, aspire to anything. In another five years those white people who attended the Sunday card-parties of the Governor would accept him—half-caste wife and all! Hooray! He saw his shadow dart forward and wave a hat, as big as a rum-barrel, at the end of an arm several yards long. . . . Who shouted hooray? . . . He smiled shamefacedly to himself, and, pushing his hands deep into his pockets, walked faster with a suddenly grave face."

How that reeling swaggerer lives! And the strange thing is that Willems lives through 383 pages, and dies living, shot by his savage mistress in a flash of jealousy:—

"Something stopped him short, and he stood aspiring the acrid smell of the blue smoke that wheeled about him. . . . Missed, by Heaven! Thought

so! And he saw her very far off; while the revolver, very small, lay on the ground between them! . . . Missed! . . . He would go and pick it up now. Never before did he understand as in that second the joy, the triumphant delight, of sunshine and of life. His mouth was full of something salt and warm. He tried to cough; spat out. . . Who shrieks? He dies! Who dies? Must pick up . . . Night! What? . . . Night already!"

Then compare Mr. Conrad's wonderful Aissa with the various combinations of Mr. Hope's "Duchess" and Mr. Weyman's fitful lady that do duty in contemporary romance. How she lives and breathes through all this jungle of tawdry pretentious verbiage!

"At the end of the first turning Willems saw a flash of white and colour, a gleam of gold like a sun-ray lost in shadow, a vision of blackness darker than the deepest shade of the forest. He stopped, surprised, and fancied he had heard light footsteps—growing lighter—ceasing. He looked around. The grass on the bank of the stream trembled, and a tremulous path of its shivering, silver-grey tops ran from the water to the beginning of the thicket. And yet there was not a breath of wind. Somebody had passed there. He looked pensive while the tremor died out in a quick tremble under his eyes; and the grass stood high, un-stirring, with drooping heads in the warm and motionless air.

"He hurried on, driven by a suddenly awakened curiosity, and entered the narrow way between the bushes. At the next turn of the path he caught again the glimpse of coloured stuff and of a woman's black hair in front of him. He hastened his pace, and came in full view of the object of his pursuit. The woman, who was carrying two bamboo vessels full of water, heard his footsteps, stopped, and, putting the bamboos down, half turned to look back. Willems also stood still for a minute, then walked steadily on with a firm tread, while the woman moved aside to let him pass. He kept his eyes fixed straight before him; yet almost unconsciously he took in every detail of the tall and graceful figure. As he approached her the woman tossed her head slightly back, and, with a free gesture of her strong round arm, caught up the mass of loose black hair, and brought it over her shoulder and across the lower part of her face. The next moment he was passing her close, walking rigidly, like a man in a trance. He heard her rapid breathing, and he felt the touch of a look darted at him from half-open eyes. It touched his brain and his heart together. It seemed to him to be something loud and stirring like a shout, silent and penetrating like an inspiration. The momentum of his motion carried him past her; but an invisible force, made up of surprise and curiosity and desire, spun him round as soon as he had passed.

"She had taken up her burden already, with the intention of pursuing her path. His sudden movement arrested her at the first step, and again she stood straight, slim, expectant, with a readiness to dart away suggested in the light immobility of her pose. High above, the branches of the trees met in a transparent shimmer or waving green mist, through which the rain of yellow rays descended upon her head, streamed in glints down her black tresses, shone with the changing glow of liquid metal on her face, and lost itself in vanishing sparks in the sombre depths of her eyes that, wide open now, with enlarged pupils, looked steadily at the man in her path. And Willems stared at her, charmed with a charm that carries with it a sense of irreparable loss, tingling with that feeling that begins like a caress and ends in a blow, in that sudden hurt of a new emotion making its way into a human heart, with the brusque stirring of sleeping sensation awakening suddenly to the rush of new hopes, new fears, new desires—and to the flight of one's old self."

Surely this is the real romance—the romance that is real! Space forbids anything but the merest recapitulation of the other living realities of Mr. Conrad's invention—of Lingard, of the inimitable Almayer, the one-eyed Babalatchi, the Naturalist, of the pious Abdulla—all novel, all authentic. Enough has been written to show Mr. Conrad's quality. He imagines his scenes and their sequence like a master, he knows

his individualities to their hearts, he has a new and wonderful field in this East Indian novel of his—and he writes despicably. He writes so as to mask and dishonour the greatness that is in him. Greatness is deliberately written; the present writer has read and re-read his two books, and, after putting this review aside for some days to consider the discretion of it, the word still stands. Only greatness could make books of which the detailed workmanship was so copiously bad, so well worth reading, so convincing, and so stimulating.

AGASSIZ.

"Life, Letters and Works of Louis Agassiz." By Jules Marcou. With Illustrations. 2 vols. London: Macmillan & Co. 1896.

MORE than twenty years have passed since Agassiz died, and, although many biographies of him have been written, we agree with the present biographer that none of them are satisfactory; written for the most part by warm admirers, they were too uniformly eulogistic, and they slurred over the less agreeable episodes in his career. In itself this would matter little, or might even be an advantage; with a greater man, weaknesses might serve for edification, linking him on to common humanity. Agassiz was no demigod, but "most remarkably like you and me." So many bitter attacks upon him exist, written by, or of, those with whom he had quarrelled, that a Life by a candid friend was advisable. M. Jules Marcou was an intimate friend of many years' standing; he collaborated with him in much of his work, and he appears to have had the love for him that sees no need for evasions or apologies, but that sets down good and evil in simple sincerity. The biography he has written will be necessary to all who would know the scientific history of our century: it is a fascinating picture of a man who succeeded because it never occurred to him that failure was possible, who did a colossal life-work because he confidently attempted the work of twenty people; of a man who wrung from the fates all the work, the praise, and the pleasure that life could bring him.

Agassiz was the son of a poor Swiss pastor, and it was in the course of his career as a medical student that he was attracted to natural history. Martius, a Professor at Munich, had made a large collection of fishes in the Amazon valley. He gave them to Agassiz to describe, undertaking, with the aid of a Government grant, the complete cost of publication and illustration. Thus, before Agassiz was twenty-two years old, he had published a great folio, with ninety coloured plates, a work that attracted the attention of all naturalists, and, in particular, the favourable notice of the great Cuvier. Agassiz then determined to abandon medicine, and, against the most urgent protests of his friends, to devote himself to a scientific career. He deliberately resolved to become the first naturalist of his day; and, but for the revolution caused by Darwin, there is little doubt that he would have achieved his object. The record of the earlier part of his life is an astonishing story of successful struggles against difficulties. There was no difficulty about material and work. Although fossil and living fishes were his chief delight, he took all nature for his field. When publishers refused the responsibility of the vast and expensive series of monographs he contemplated, he cheerfully determined to publish on his own account. He surrounded himself with assistants, engaged artists, hired a lithographer, and set up a printing establishment of his own. When money came, either from occasional sales, from subscriptions, or by loans and gifts, it was swallowed up at once; when money did not come, the work and the workers were expected to go on, and actually did go on, exactly as before. There was much of the insolence of genius, of what perhaps a carping Nordau would call megalomania, in the calm fashion in which Agassiz neglected the dull commercial aspect of debt and financial obligation. When he had exhausted Europe he went to America, and the marvellous enthusiasm and colossal audacity of the man took the new world by storm. He soon was made a Professor at Harvard; he lectured in nearly every town of the Eastern States; he brought over his old assistants and friends from Europe, and he