

## ÉDOUARD ROD

(Concluded.)



ROD'S chief ambition at this time was to write a novel "detached from all contingent circumstances, a novel which should be exclusively internal, the action taking place in the heart." It was under this impulse that *La Course à la Mort* was written, which, as he is fond of telling us, is of all his works the one to which he has remained most strongly attached.

It would be difficult to conceive of a more thoroughly incorporeal type of fiction. It gives one the sensation of being cut loose from the material world and raised into regions of pure abstractions. There are practically no descriptions of scenes and places, upon which the imagination can lay hold; the weather, the season, the time of day—all, in short, that is usually understood in that useful term of *milieu*—is intentionally relegated to the background. The story is devoid of conversation, as the characters are of names; it is simply one long monologue of pessimism—Schopenhauer pure and simple. "A three-hundred-page commentary on the word of Ecclesiastes," as M. Doumic defines it. It gives the inner life of a young man whose powers are atrophied by the burden of life. He refuses to be confounded with René, Werther or Lara, "egoists who thought only of their own poor personal passions"; it is "the sobs of all mankind" which fills his breast. He loves, but lacks the courage to ask another to share a life so burdened with the sufferings of humanity. Doubting all things, he doubts her love as well, and even if he could be assured of that, he would still doubt his own love for her. And while he lacks the strength of mind necessary for self-destruction, yet in the end he commits a species of moral suicide by retiring to a solitary retreat where he can give himself up to the charms of a vegetative life, acknowledging that the world contains but two good things, silence and immobility.

I cannot understand why *Le Sens de la Vie* has been considered as less pessimistic than *La Course à la Mort*. To me it

is the more hopeless of the two; and yet, curiously enough, it is of all his volumes the one to which I find myself most frequently reverting, for it touches with consummate skill upon the contradictions of the human heart. This time his hero decides not to sit apart and meditate, but decides to sustain his part in the world's struggle, and to wring from existence the secret of its significance. From a worldly point of view, he is amply blessed with the good things of life—vigorous health, abundant means, and kindly friends. Having no real sorrows, he persistently creates imaginary ones. He marries; and to his surprise no disillusion follows the honeymoon; on the contrary, he and his wife prove to be admirably suited to one another. He is fully prepared to regret the freedom of his bachelor days, but a single evening at the club forces from him a bewildered recognition that he is more contented at home. In the course of time a child is born without the occurrence of any of the disastrous complications with the anticipations of which this chronic alarmist has for months been torturing himself. But he does not accept the burden of paternity gracefully; he finds that he cannot love the child; it disarranges all his settled habits, and is a constant source of petty grievances. He is absurdly angry at the prying officiousness of the authorities who require him to record its birth, and he suffers keenly at having to yield to the wife's desire to have it baptized. Before long, however, the child sickens, and for days its life hangs in the balance; and when the crisis comes and he knows that it will live—for here, as elsewhere, his good luck follows him—the father in him awakes, and he realises that he loves it after all. And now he is more unhappy than before, for here is one more being that is dear to him, and for whom he must henceforth apprehend the wretchedness of life. So one after another his attempts to find the meaning of life fail, and when at last he is driven to seek comfort in the religion of his childhood, we take leave of him on his knees in the church of St. Sulpice, pitifully murmuring the Lord's Prayer, "which, alas! comes from his lips only."

*Les Trois Cœurs*, which is quite as abstract as its predecessors, is interesting only as a transition work, so we may pass on at once to his first story with a vigorous plot, *La Sacrifice*. Pierre Morgex is a physician, and being also a thorough-going materialist, he does not hesitate to promise his old friend Audouin that if the latter should ever be stricken down with apoplexy, he will not suffer him to linger on, a helpless burden to his friends, but that a well-timed overdose of opium shall solve the problem. Before long, however, the Doctor awakes to the distressing knowledge that he has fallen in love with his friend's wife, Clotilde, and that the latter is far from indifferent to him. Nevertheless, when the dreaded attack occurs the Doctor carries out his agreement and eventually marries Clotilde. But his conscience will give him no peace. Without the complication of love, he would have had no misgivings regarding his right to cut short a human life which had ceased to be worth living; but now the doubt whether he acted from self-interest or solely from a sense of duty destroys his peace of mind. Finally he lays his case successively before two friends, a judge and a priest. The interpreter of human law freely absolves him; the representative of the divine law cannot do so; and it is in accordance with the latter's counsel that he leaves his wife, for whose sake he has sinned, and who thus becomes the innocent victim, "La Sacrifice."

In the volumes which follow, M. Rod has refrained from introducing the element of crime, but has continued to probe deeply into similar questions of conscience. *Michel Teissier*, *Le Silence*, *Les Roches Blanches*, *Le Dernier Refuge*, all belong to the type of "Roman passionnel"; in each of them he seeks to show that in these "delicate questions of the heart" no one has the right to define the limits of good and evil; no one has the right to say when "love forbidden by human laws is also forbidden by those superior laws of whose divine indulgence we sometimes have a premonition." Teissier and Blanche, Kermoyan and Mme. Hervedin, Trembloz and Mme. de Bussens, Duguay and Hélène Berthemey, are all unhappy couples who have had the misfortune to love in defiance of so-

cial conventions, and in one mode or another pay the penalty of their offence. The legend of the White Rocks, which gives the name to one of these stories, admirably symbolises the dilemma which forms his chief preoccupation. It is the legend of a Trappist and a nun, who had formerly loved, but, because they could not marry, had taken refuge in religion. The love, however, which they thought dead, but which proved to be only dormant, awoke again in their hearts; they met by stealth, but at the first kiss they were turned to stone. And here is the lesson of the legend:

This is the lot of those who have too much soul to remain ignorant of love, and too much virtue to give themselves up to it in thoughtlessness and joy; whether they resist or fall, sorrow awaits them; the light which shines within them must consume them or burn itself out, and if they are not the culpable victims of their own hearts, it is because their hearts have no other refuge than to turn to stone.

*Michel Teissier* is an example of those who fall. A man of rare attainments, a political leader, the husband of a devoted wife, he successively betrays his country, his party and his family, for the sake of a young girl, his ward, whom he ultimately marries, and in so doing makes the rest of his life one long expiation. Henri Trembloz, in *Les Roches Blanches*, is an instance of the opposite type, one of those who resist and whose hearts are turned to stone. Although a peasant by birth, he receives, thanks to his mother's self-sacrifice, a university training, and as a theological student gives proof of "an impeccable memory and an exceptional gift of eloquence." Being recalled to his native village as its pastor, he receives especial favour from Mme. de Bussens, the wife of his most influential parishioner, and the transition from esteem to love is both easy and rapid. In their case, however, many things—religion, education, temperament, the very climate itself—conspire to prevent any irreparable consequences; as M. Rod phrases it, their souls conquered, but "the triumph resembled one of those victories without a morrow, which leaves the victor more feeble than his enemy." This story, which was the first of his works to be translated into English, is interesting

not only for its admirable portrayal of Swiss life, but also because it is the most obvious example of his indebtedness to Stendhal. If space permitted, it would be a curious study to trace the numerous resemblances to *Le Rouge et le Noir*.

Neither the victory of the flesh in *Michel Teissier*, nor the victory of the spirit in *Los Roches Blanches*, seems to have satisfied M. Rod. In *Le Dernier Refuge* he seeks a middl course. This story, in many respects the most powerful that he has yet written, is nothing more nor less than a glorification of love, the love that "sweeps away law and duty as a hurricane snaps the trunks of trees and scatters their foliage." Like d'Annunzio in *Trionfo della Morte*, he has sought his inspiration at Bayreuth, in the exaltation of Isolde's death-song; and also, like d'Annunzio, he finds in death the only logical outcome for a love of this nature. Unlike Henri Tremblaz, Martial Duguay is not a pastor nor even a Protestant, but an inventor, who pays small heed to religion of any sort. Ostensibly, he is engrossed in the perfection of a new electrical marvel, the *scophophore*, which the banking house of Berthemey and Levolle has undertaken to promote; in reality his mind has room for but one thought, his love for Berthemey's wife, H el ene. Although they have already reached the epoch of furtive rendezvous, Martial is desperately unhappy; he finds himself hating everyone who approaches her, "for do they not all rob him of something, of some small part of her beauty, her smile, her glance?" Above all, he hates the husband, the dictatorial, self-sufficient Berthemey, who has right and law and society all on his side. The very secrecy of their meetings is intolerable; he cannot endure the thought of "a long life of hypocrisy and lies." His constant prayer is that H el ene shall definitely leave her home and let him claim her openly in defiance of the world; or if they cannot live together, they can die; "it is but a step from love to death." But H el ene only looks at him "with eyes of pity," and denies his prayer. The crisis comes unexpectedly, during the long summer separation which Duguay has learned to dread. The days go by, and no word comes from her, until he can bear the suspense no longer, and using the

scophophore as a pretext, pays a visit to Berthemey's summer home. Here he finds his worst fears confirmed; Mme. Berthemey has been dangerously ill—appendicitis, the anxious husband explains, and proceeds to give minute details of the operation; then for the first time he observes Duguay's convulsed features, and his suspicions are aroused. He promptly forbids Duguay the house, and H el ene's flight from home follows as a matter of course. "I have come," she tells her lover, "I am no longer afraid . . . let us die together." And so, after lingering a few brief weeks in the ideal spot where they have taken refuge, overlooking the Gulf of Spezzia, they go out of life together, thus expiating, so M. Rod seems to think, their sin against society.

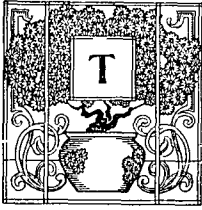
Readers whose first requirement of a novel is that it shall contain an interesting story, will naturally give preference to these later books, for while lacking the personal charm of *Le Sens de la Vie*, they contain far greater variety of incident and character; they tell us something of the hero's physical as well as his mental attributes—of the colour of his hair and eyes, of the house he lives in, and the clothes he wears. Rod's growing tendency in this direction is especially noticeable in his recent *Menage du Pasteur Naudi *, which Bruneti ere has pronounced one of the books of the year, and which is soon to be issued in this country. It tells how a minister of the Gospel learned to his cost that he could not serve two masters; that he could not do his duty to his God, and at the same time serve Mammon in the shape of a charming but capricious young wife. So he dedicates the remainder of his life to the heathen of Central Africa, where, presumably, he will find a chance to do ample penance for his error.

It is not the design of the present article to discuss the ethical value of M. Rod's moral theories, disputable though they are. It will have accomplished its purpose if it draws attention to some of the more striking phases of thought in a writer who, because he lacks the meteoric brilliance of some of his contemporaries, has been slower in attaining that widespread recognition to which his many and obvious talents, both as critic and as novelist, have long since entitled him.

Frederic Taber Cooper.

## RUDYARD KIPLING

"THE LAUREATE OF ENGLISH ENDEAVOUR."



HE gods were extravagantly good to Mr. Kipling, for with his gift of dramatic tale and a career to equip him for its expression, they gave him the gift of poetry, lacking which prose narrative is soulless and evanescent. It is the poetic insight that over and over again redeems brutal and even vulgar passages in his tales from our indifference or contempt; there he would have shown the poet if *Departmental Ditties*, *Barrack-room Ballads* and *The Seven Seas* had never been written. But he has in his works of verse justified himself as the Laureate of English endeavour. A brain-weary people, sick of abstruse sermons played upon dulcimers, have hailed with gladness a song and chorus accompanied by the banjo. Some of the strenuous young gentlemen who sing in pestilent, obtruse and jerky measure of life, time and early demise have an equipment Mr. Kipling cannot or does not boast of. They rejoice in vocabularies extensive and precious; they have a fastidiousness that keeps them clear of the cheap tune, the vulgar hero, the sentiment of the *Lion Comique*, the dialect that is unheard in drawing-rooms. They can write much that Mr. Kipling could not write to save his soul, but they cannot write so as to be read or listened to, which, cant aside, has been the first ambition of every ballad-maker since the days when Homer smote his lyre. Literature in prose or poetry is saved from eternal perdition by fresh starts; just when the material of conventional verse has been spread out thin to invisibility, and sheer intellect is going to upset our apple-cart, a lark soars into the heavens with a simple song for lesson, a man sheds the ceremonies of convention, steps back from the choir, and gives his natural voice a trial unafraid. Then, no matter what he sings—weariness and fret, the joy of life, passion, Spring or stars, if a robust individuality, a clean nature, a lyric lilt and cadence be his, we must be listening. His are the airs that the peo-

ple find haunting; they may be even only temporary in appeal, but permanence is not, in spite of all we say to the contrary, the first and greatest essential of poetry. Wharton boasted that with "Lillibulero" he had whistled a king out of three kingdoms; we have to-day forgotten that air that Uncle Toby so constantly dwelt on, but in the final balancing of things that have influenced, who can say that the forgotten "Lillibulero" is not more weighty than studious measures in classic mould a few rare exclusive souls have sung for centuries?

With material entirely new, with a method novel, Kipling, in *Barrack-room Ballads* and *The Seven Seas*, has captured the general ear and touched the general heart. That, it may be retorted, was done aforetime by the Muse of Mr. Sims. Yet in this instance there is a great difference, though it seems sacrilege to hint the necessity of differentiation. It is not the music-hall audience alone that is impressed by the weird terror of "Danny Deever," the sentiment of the majestic "Ballad of East and West," the élan of the "Sons of the Widow," and the cadence and wistfulness of "Mandalay." In these measures artists have found the lyric note no way abased. Good as the *Barrack-room Ballads* were, the more recent *Seven Seas* was better. There we found Mr. Kipling, still with "the best words in the best order," as Coleridge defined poetry, but more profound in the hearts of man. A wider sweep of interests, a more mature valuation of the phenomena of life, a more opulent and canorous note peals in his lines, the man behind the instrument is more finely revealed. Any claim by any other living man than the author of "A Song of the English" to be considered the laureate by divine right of English peoples would be ridiculous. But the Imperialism of the book is only one of its impressive features. The age of steam and telegraph, Hotchkiss guns and Saratoga trunks has found its balladist there, and he has found nothing common or unclean. The soldiers of the later military ballads, too, betray an aging creator; they are still strumming