

## **AN OBSERVER IN MALAYA --1898**

In his new volume, Mr. Hugh Clifford, at the beginning of the sketch entitled "At the Heels of the White Man," expresses his anxiety as to the state of England's account in the Day-Book of the Recording Angel "for the good and the bad we have done--both with the most excellent intentions." The intentions will, no doubt, count for something, though, of course, every nation's conquests are paved with good intentions; or it may be that the Recording Angel, looking compassionately at the strife of hearts, may disdain to enter into the Eternal Book the facts of a struggle which has the reward of its righteousness even on this earth--in victory and lasting greatness, or in defeat and humiliation.

And, also, love will count for much. If the opinion of a looker-on from afar is worth anything, Mr. Hugh Clifford's anxiety about his country's record is needless. To the Malays whom he governs, instructs, and guides he is the embodiment of the intentions, of the conscience and might of his race. And of all the nations conquering distant territories in the name of the most excellent intentions, England alone sends out men who, with such a transparent sincerity of feeling, can speak, as Mr. Hugh Clifford does, of the place of toil and exile as "the land which is very dear to me, where the best years of my life have been spent"--and where (I would stake my right hand on it) his name is pronounced with respect and affection by those brown men about whom he writes.

All these studies are on a high level of interest, though not all on the same level. The descriptive chapters, results of personal observation, seem to me the most interesting. And, indeed, in a book of this kind it is the author's personality which awakens the greatest interest; it shapes itself before one in the ring of sentences, it is seen between the lines--like the progress of a traveller in the jungle that may be traced by the sound of the parang chopping the swaying creepers, while the man himself is glimpsed, now and then, indistinct and passing between the trees. Thus in his very vagueness of appearance, the writer seen through the leaves of his book becomes a fascinating companion in a land of fascination.

It is when dealing with the aspects of nature that Mr. Hugh Clifford is most convincing. He looks upon them lovingly, for the land is "very dear to him," and he records his cherished impressions so that the forest, the great flood, the jungle, the rapid river, and the menacing rock dwell in the memory of the reader long after the book is closed. He does not say anything, in so many words, of his affection for those who live amid the scenes he describes so well, but his humanity is large enough to pardon us if we suspect him of such a rare

weakness. In his preface he expresses the regret at not having the gifts (whatever they may be) of the kailyard school, or--looking up to a very different plane--the genius of Mr. Barrie. He has, however, gifts of his own, and his genius has served his country and his fortunes in another direction. Yet it is when attempting what he professes himself unable to do, in telling us the simple story of Umat, the punkah-puller, with unaffected simplicity and half-concealed tenderness, that he comes nearest to artistic achievement.

Each study in this volume presents some idea, illustrated by a fact told without artifice, but with an elective sureness of knowledge. The story of *Tukang Burok's* love, related in the old man's own words, conveys the very breath of Malay thought and speech. In "His Little Bill," the coolie, Lim Teng Wah, facing his debtor, stands very distinct before us, an insignificant and tragic victim of fate with whom he had quarrelled to the death over a matter of seven dollars and sixty-eight cents. The story of "The Schooner with a Past" may be heard, from the Straits eastward, with many variations. Out in the Pacific the schooner becomes a cutter, and the pearl-divers are replaced by the Black-birds of the Labour Trade. But Mr. Hugh Clifford's variation is very good. There is a passage in it--a trifle--just the diver as seen coming up from the depths, that in its dozen lines or so attains to distinct artistic value. And, scattered through the book, there are many other passages of almost equal descriptive excellence.

Nevertheless, to apply artistic standards to this book would be a fundamental error in appreciation. Like faith, enthusiasm, or heroism, art veils part of the truth of life to make the rest appear more splendid, inspiring, or sinister. And this book is only truth, interesting and futile, truth unadorned, simple and straightforward. The Resident of Pahang has the devoted friendship of Umat, the punkah-puller, he has an individual faculty of vision, a large sympathy, and the scrupulous consciousness of the good and evil in his hands. He may as well rest content with such gifts. One cannot expect to be, at the same time, a ruler of men and an irreproachable player on the flute.