Albumblatt

THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES.
By André Gide . . . Translated by Dorothy Bussy . . . *New York: Alfred A. Knopf* . . . $2.

Reviewed by
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AN author who wishes to profit rapidly by his success is forced to specialize. Having once created a public for himself, he is thenceforth ruled by its tastes, which he has helped to form: in other words, he is limited by his past achievements to one mood, one medium, and usually to one group of subjects. He abandons the uncertain joys of discovery for the rewards of exploitation. On the other hand, an author whose ambitions are less immediate is more at liberty to experiment in different fields. He may write poetry and prose, novels and dramas, but it is very seldom that he attempts so many different subjects and treatments that we can speak of him as having adopted the whole world of literature for his province.

Such is the case, however, with André Gide. To mention only his translated works—less than a fourth of those published in France—one of them is a tightly written psychological novel, another is an impossible and delightful adventure story, a third and a fourth are respectively a long critical study and a volume of travels in the Congo, a fifth is a very great novel in the leisurely, inclusive manner of Dickens and Dostoievsky . . . This list does not yet include two books which are indispensable to the understanding of Gide's career as a whole: I mean "Les Nourritures Terrestres," a sort of lyric miscellany in which he propounds his fundamental ideas, and "Si le Grain ne Meurt," his dignified and alarmingly honest autobiography.

"The School for Wives," the last book he has written and the sixth to be translated, belongs to still another classification: it is a story told briefly by means of a woman's diary. In technique, however, it is essentially dramatic, being the history of a conflict that progresses by a series of revelations and confrontations, almost like one of Racine's tragedies, toward its one possible conclusion.

The characters in conflict are the two Delabordes. Eveline, the wife, is an admirably conscientious woman who is struggling, not for self-expression, but for honesty and self-respect. Robert, her political minded husband, is full of resounding principles, but at the same time he is willing to cheat, lie, or abase himself to achieve any petty triumph. He is a man of pliant surfaces, a hollow man with the soul of a matinee idol or a lobbyist—in other words, no soul at all: merely a few fragments of vanity and ambition that rattle inside him like dried peas. It is even a sort of compliment to call him hypocritical: in reality he is not frank enough with himself to realize the distance between his actions and his professions of faith. Eveline is actually the hypocrite of the two: for the last twenty years, she has consented to live against her beliefs. As for the two children, they have followed their parents: Gustave is like his father, and Geneviève, though she belongs to a generation less willing to compromise, is in other respects like her mother. Her frankness precipitates the final scene in which Eveline confronts her husband, announces that she can no longer live with him, and then is conquered like one of Shaw's heroines by her own strength and by his lack of it.

The story as a whole is a curious contrast to Gide's last novel. "The Counterfeiters" was long, rich complicated; it treated many characters from many points of view; it attacked problems of conduct in a new way and reached heights of tragic feeling which have not

been equalled since Dostoievsky. "The School for Wives" lacks all these qualities, for which it partly compensates by other virtues: naturalness, directness, and a surface perfection which conceals a good many subtleties of character and judgment. Its limpid style is well rendered by Dorothy Bussy, Gide's official translator; her work, which was not very satisfactory at first, has improved with each new book. And yet, the novel will be disappointing to those readers who, unfamiliar with its author's versatility, were expecting something more ambitious.

How shall we answer their complaint? . . . We might say that the book is like Giotto's circle, and that its simplicity could be achieved only by a master craftsman. Or we might take a different analogy from music. During his later years, in the intervals between great symphonies, Beethoven produced a number of very simple compositions for the pianoforte. Now, I have no intention of comparing the author of "The School for Wives" with a man whose genius, after all, was of a different order, but Gide, too, is a matter of many effects: he has lately written a rich symphonic work, and now that he turns to a simple narrative, a sort of *Albumblatt*, we have no right to be disappointed.