THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES, ROBERT, GENEVIEVE, OR THE UNFINISHED CONFIDENCE.

By Andre Gide. Translated from the French by Dorothy Bussy. *241 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. $2.75.*

Reviewed by
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THIS volume brings together three interrelated noveletties of which only the first has been available in an English version. "The School for Wives" and "Robert" were published in France in 1929, three years after "The Counterfeiters." Nearly a decade passed before Gide completed the series with "Geneviéve." Collectively, these tales form a single story which is reflected for the reader, as it were, by a triple mirror. Its subject is an unhappy marriage, the history of which is related successively by the wife, the husband, and their daughter, each of whom contributes a purely personal interpretation supported by evidence not disclosed by the others.

Gide describes these tales as a triptych, and they are among his most characteristic works of fiction. They exemplify his lifelong preoccupation with psychological analysis; his conviction that the real drama of life is internal, not external; his resulting indifference to the element of plot and his concentration on the element of motive. They exhibit, likewise, his disposition to examine all problems of ethics from as many conflicting points of view as possible. In addition, these tales touch on a number of the themes with which, during his long career, Gide has been permanently concerned. Finally, they again reveal his mastery of the principle of economy. In them, Gide achieves a notable intensity, although he excludes from his narrative much that a less skillful craftsman would be tempted to develop at length. These tales demonstrate his ability to make a minimum of substance yield a long perspective and a large significance.

One of Gide's cardinal beliefs is that the individual must attain integrity of character and must dare to live authentically. "The only drama that really interests me," he notes in one of his journals, ". . . is the debate of the individual with whatever keeps him from being authentic, with whatever is opposed to his integrity, to his integration." In Gide's fiction, this obstacle takes various forms. Conscience opposes reason. Society exercises pressure through customs, traditions, conventional morality. The institutions of marriage and the family are formidable deterrents. One of Gide's early critical essays—not yet translated into English—makes the point that, whereas Greek ethics inculcated the virtue of self-development by the extension of native endowment, Christian ethics have laid on men the duty of trying to become altogether unlike themselves. The most vicious aspect of modern society, Gide asserts, is the basic hypocrisy of its mores, which operate to inhibit or deform individuality rather than to enhance it.

All of these contentions are expressed, or implied, by the three novelettes. The marriage with which they deal is unhappy in only the most commonplace fashion. But its consequences in three lives raise ultimate issues in social ethics. Gide bases his tales upon the convention that they have been transmitted to him, for publication, by the three people who relate them in the first person. "The School for Wives" purports to be the journal of Eveline, sent to him, after her death, by her daughter. "Robert" is the defensive reply of Eveline's husband, provoked by the publication of her journal. In "Geneviéve," their daughter undertakes to clarify the record left by her mother, and rebut her father's rejoinder to it. Geneviéve herself represents the "new woman" who emerged after the first world war, and her attitude to the institution of marriage reflects that of André Gide.

Eveline is the young French-woman of Gide's youth. The marriage of her parents, as she knows, has degenerated into a conjugal habit, a conventional partnership