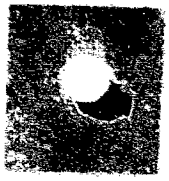
MODERN MASTERPIECES

L'ECOLE DES FEMMES. Par ANDRÉ GIDE. (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française. 12f.)

LES VARAIS. Par JACQUES CHARDONNE. (Paris: Grasset. 12f.)

The qualities esteemed in France as essential to a masterpiece have changed considerably since the War changed everything. In 1913 (which is the date, for example, of "La Colline Inspirée") how France prized those violinlike cadences, that complex tormented imagination (sometimes transfigured into irony and detachment) and that mysterious intuition of Nature ever at war with Order. But now Romance and all its appurtenances have vanished from the scene; what is admired is a nice adjustment of means to an end, a strict perfection of phrase, a cool and quiet elegance of tone, a psychology exact and penetrating, which no longer is fascinated by the strange or the exceptional, but which aims rather at illuminating examples to be met with every day. Barrès and his magic have passed away; to-day André Gide is all the cry.



In his new novel he fulfils all the conditions of a modern masterpiece. As surely as (but how differently from!) George Eliot in her unwieldy but ever-interesting "Middlemarch," he shows us the beauty of a girl's idolizing hero-worship, the happiness of young love, and the gradual growth in that love of a critical awareness which ends in the most positive and insurmountable aversion. The sincere and innocent heroine of "L'Ecole des Femmes" has married a windbag—a windbag and a "climber"—not a hypocrite (for he has no intent to deceive his neighbours and is, indeed, his own dupe), but a man incapable of neglecting on any occasion his interest and his advancement. Nothing he does, nothing he says, is free, gratuitous. All his actions aim at his own final predominance. And after twenty years of his companionship the unfortunate Eveline, satiated to the core with her disgust, leaves a bewildered husband who cannot imagine why his wife should abandon her home and a heart that, whatever its faults, has never ceased to regard her with due affection. The War breaking out simplifies everything. Robert gains fresh laurels at the least possible expense, and Eveline enters a fever hospital as a nurse of the Red Cross. She dies there, which is perhaps the best way out of her blind alley. What is a woman to do who, having spent all her fortune on buying a pearl of great price, discovers that, although very pretty, it is one of those ingenious compositions of wax and herring-scales which have no intrinsic worth? Shall she continue to wear it as a thing of value, or shall she pitch it into the gutter? There is more than one possible answer to this question, especially for a wife who is also a mother; but the presence of a young son (in whom she sees the father revive with all his fallacious graces) and of a daughter framed in her own image cannot soften the heart—or shall we say the heroism? of M. Gide's Eveline.

has a motor accident; his broken arm and bandaged head would have brought a tear to the eyes of some women (of an Ismene, for example), that would blind them for a moment to his faults. And when she declares her intention of leaving him a storm of passionate sobbing shakes the miserable Robert, but that, too, leaves Eveline unmoved. She is of the uncomfortable race of Antigone. Or rather, perhaps, she is too exasperated even to be just, much less compassionate, and it is true that nothing nauseates like instinctive essential insincerity. This book, which appears to be a companion piece to "La Porte Etroite," shows us at another angle the intolerableness of a pure idealist. M. Gide has never probed a subject with a more exact and delicate touch. Nor is this portrait of a virtuous woman marred by the faintest hint of his own peculiar ethics. The immoralist on this occasion has written a book which may be placed in the hands of innocence.