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Review

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THE WRITINGS OF M. ANDRÉ GIDE.

INTERNATIONAL taste in literary matters is apt to be very capricious. France, well-informed about Stevenson and Mr. Kipling, full of curiosity regarding Swinburne and Mr. Hardy, could not, to the day of his death, focus her vision upon the figure of George Meredith. These are classic names, but, among those who are still competitors for immortality, mere accident seems to rule their exotic reputation. The subject of the following reflections is an example of this caprice. He was born forty years ago; his life has been, it appears, devoted to the art of writing, of which he has come to be looked upon in France as a master. In Germany, in Italy, he has a wide vogue, especially in the former. But, so far as I have noticed, his name is almost unknown in England. This is the more extraordinary because, as I hope to suggest, his mind is more closely attuned to English ideas, or what once were English ideas, than that of any other living writer of France. He has reproved (in *Lettres à Angèle* and elsewhere) the "detestable infatuation" of those who hold that nothing speaks intelligibly to the French mind, nor can truly sound well in a French ear, except that which has a French origin. M. Gide has shown himself singularly attentive to those melodies of the spirit which have an English origin, but his own music seems as yet to have found no echo here.

Of the career of M. Gide I know but little, since he is not one of those who talk freely about themselves in their books. But I take him to be a southerner by extraction, born, or at least bred, in Normandy; an Albigense transplanted, with all his hereditary Protestantism, from Languedoc to the shores of the Channel. He says, somewhere, that the Oc and the Oïl are equally familiar to his ear, and that he is not more devoted to the blossom of the apple than to that of the pomegranate. He has been, too, it is evident,

a great wanderer over the face of Europe and Africa (*Amyntas*), and he affects, with an easy grace, some of the airs of the cosmopolitan. But in his heart I think that M. Gide is faithful to the Norman orchards. He is a product of Calvinism, and the extraordinary interest which the movements of his mind present, is due to the concinnity they reveal in his moral basis. He offers himself to us, rather shyly, but very persistently, as a French Protestant who has grown up and out, oh! so far and so pathetically *out*, of the firm low root based upon the *Institution Chrétienne*. As a rule, the products of French Protestantism have not much general value for an English reader. Our race has gone so much further in that direction, and with so much more variety! The sacrifice of Calvinism to the national unity of the French has tended to dwarf the intellectual manifestations of the sect. But in the writings of M. Gide it is, I think, not too fantastic to discover what the importance of a Huguenot training can be in the development of a mind which has wholly delivered itself from the Huguenot bondage.

The progress of M. Gide has been slow. He attempted many things, sentimental autobiography, something after the fashion of Mr. A. C. Benson; poems in which he followed Laforgue and floated on the stream of symbolism; miscellaneous and extravagant tentatives, which were half prose, half poetry. Gradually he gained confidence. In 1899 his fantastic dream of a Prometheus in the Paris of our day was scornfully contested by the critics of the moment. In his curious dramas, *Saül* and *Le Roi Candaule*, he felt his way towards a more and more personal mode of expression. He found it in his first serious novel, *L'Immoraliste*, in his essays (*Feuilles de route; Prétextes*), in his criticism. He has become what an early admirer prophesied that he would become, "a luminous "levite," one who with instant daily service tends the altar of intelligence and grace. He has gradually detached the singular originality of his temper from those accidents of style that enwrap, as silk enwraps a chrysalis, the formal parts of a new and ardent writer. He has published this summer a work which makes it now perfectly certain that M. Gide is one of the imaginative authors of France whose work counts. In *La Porte Étroite* (*Mercur de France*; Paris, 1909), he has written one of the most beautiful books which has been printed for a long time past. A presentation of M. Gide, therefore, can hardly be better made than as the author of this subtle story.

The scene of *La Porte Étroite* is laid in the neighbourhood of Havre, where there exists, and has always existed, a numerous Huguenot congregation. The hero of the story, who tells the tale, is the only child of an austere and melancholy, but passive, widow; she and he share the company of a gentle English maiden lady, Miss Flora Ashburton, whose sunken fortunes have led her

gratefully to accept this asylum. Between these pious gentlewomen, Jérôme gradually develops from infancy to boyhood in a sheltered air. His only diversion is an occasional visit to his cousins, the Bucolins, who inhabit a large house, set in a great tumultuous garden, close by at Fougueusemare. The Bucolins are Protestants also, and worship at the Havre "temple," but their religion is not so sombre as that of Jérôme's household, and in their life there are exceptional circumstances. Uncle Bucolin is an active man, engaged in business, and Aunt Bucolin is more exceptional still, for she is a creole from Martinique, and she lies in bed half the day, and in a hammock the other half. The character of Aunt Bucolin has always been felt to be hostile to the heavenly calling, and as the years go by she becomes more reckless. The Bucolins have three children, the eldest of whom, Alissa, is two years older than Jérôme; Juliette and Robert are younger.

Jérôme cannot recollect a time when a kind of vague and seraphic attraction has not projected itself on his juvenile spirit from the presence and voice of his cousin, Alissa. She has developed, and is still developing, a delicate virginal beauty, of the Tuscan order. To the boy's innocent pedantry her pale oval face, and eyebrows tenderly arched, recall the vision of Beatrice. There is, however, no realisation of the nature of this feeling on his part until, one day, a singular set of circumstances combine to give it voice. In the unsuspecting absences of Uncle Bucolin on business, in the innocence of her two younger children, the creole aunt finds her opportunity to cultivate objectionable and dangerous acquaintances, and Jérôme is present at a "scene" when the lady from Martinique is guilty of an odious want of decorum. He flies to the room of his cousin, Alissa, who alone is conscious of the horror which surrounds them all, and who greets him, turning as she kneels in supplication at her toilet-table, with an agonised cry, "Oh Jérôme, pourquoi reviens-tu?" He cannot understand, or but very vaguely divines, what is the cause of Alissa's beautiful anguish, but he feels the celestial purity of her sorrow; he interprets her cry as including him, adding his distress to the sum of her humiliations; and this is the turning-point of his life. For the future the boy will exist for no other purpose than to fill the soul of Alissa with happiness and peace.

The terrible creole woman presently cuts the knot herself by disappearing with one of her lovers, and the Bucolin family never hear of her again. Gradually they settle down again into their customary mode of life, their pious attendance on the means of grace, their cheerful relations with others, their mutual devotion. The sinful branch has been cut off; it has severed itself in a storm and been carried away in a night by the wind. At the chapel the incident is referred to, in the allusive manner customary among the devout, in the course of a powerful sermon on the text "*Efforcez-vous d'entrer*

"par la porte étroite!" The wide gate which leadeth to destruction is picturesquely described, and Aunt Bucolin, without actually being mentioned, is recalled to every mind as one of the noisiest of that over-dressed and loudly-laughing multitude which the preacher sees gaily descending to hell in the hideous exaggeration of sin. This remarkable discourse makes a profound impression upon Jérôme. He imagines himself, against his will, elbowed by the sin-stricken crowd, and stunned by the noise of its laughter. Each step he takes divides him further and further from the melancholy eyes of Alissa. Suddenly the preacher makes a new and a direct appeal: "Strive to 'enter in at the strait gate!' and dilates on the pure, the ineffable joy which streams from a life of self-abnegation, a life all devoted to sacrifice and holy sorrow. He compares this state of grace, this strenuous "walk with God," with an air played in a lovely garden on a violin, an ecstasy at once strident and tender. "Few there be," he exclaims, "who are chosen to pursue this life of sanctification." "I will be one of those few!" says Jérôme to himself. Looking across the pews of the chapel he sees the pure countenance of Alissa all lighted up with the inward radiance, and he consciously unites, for the first time, the idea of her love with that of the perfect love of Christ. He undergoes a double conversion; he gives his soul without reserve to God and to Alissa.

This conjunction of influences acts decisively on a spirit already prepared for it by the exercises of religion and by the puritan discipline of family life. As M. Gide very cleverly makes us feel, it is as natural for his hero to submit to moral restraints as it is for others to resist them. The instinctive habit of the circle in which Jérôme had been brought up was to seek for happiness where others seek for pleasure, and to find pleasure only in the Lord's service. But in spite of this condition of mind and heart, the world, with all its many-coloured show, is rapidly expanding before the lad, and he begins to comprehend, as many a pious youth has comprehended, that he cannot shelter his faith for ever behind the almost monastic hedges of private habit. In this crisis, the love of Alissa seems to resemble the pearl of great price of which the Gospel speaks; it is that for which Jérôme will cheerfully and even thankfully sell all that he has. It is with a hand of extraordinary firmness and delicacy that the author has drawn the years of adolescence, in which the nature of Jérôme widens and strengthens, without ever failing to keep the figure of Alissa before him like a star to guide him:

Travail, efforts, actions pies, mystiquement j'offrais tout à Alissa, inventant un raffinement de vertu, à lui laisser souvent ignorer ce que je n'avais fait que pour elle. Je m'enivrais ainsi d'une sorte de modestie capiteuse et m'habituais, hélas! consultant peu ma plaisance, à ne me satisfaire à rien qui ne m'eût coûté quelque effort.

But the interest of the story now centres in Alissa, of whom we ask, as Jérôme asks, what will be the development of her riper and perhaps intenser nature. Our first suspicion of a tragic destiny comes over us in the course of a scene, very lightly and even laughingly conducted, where Jérôme involuntarily overhears a conversation in the garden between his cousin and her father. Jérôme himself is the subject of their discussion, and his tendency to lean on the spiritual strength of others is animadverted upon. This leads to a talk between the cousins themselves, in which Alissa significantly asks him, "N'es tu pas assez fort pour marcher seul? C'est tout "seul que chacun de nous doit gagner Dieu." She gently refuses to be his guide any longer: the soul can have no other guide but Christ. She winnows the vague grain of Jérôme's convictions, and his pious sentimentality is blown away in chaff by the steady breeze of Alissa's clearer theology. Still, he can but worship God in and through her. That, she replies, he must not do, for pure worship sees nothing between the worshipper and God Himself. This is the first little rift within the lute of their perfect unison of hearts, and it marks the difference upon which their happiness is to be ultimately shattered.

It would be to give a very false idea of this charming book to dwell to excess on the religious problem which it raises. The story is one of domestic provincial life in the north of France, among gentle and cultivated people, which is full of amusing studies of character, natural and entertaining incidents, and evidences of witty observation on the part of the author. But the real subject of the volume, the thread which runs through it and gives it intellectual adhesion, after all is precisely a searching analysis of the incompleteness and narrowness of the moral psychology of Protestantism. The author has seen how cruelly pietists suffer from excess of scruple, how disastrously they can be overwhelmed by the vain sentiment of sinfulness. He deals with a state of soul which is more comprehensible in English society than in French, and which has, perhaps, found no exponent before in the literature of France outside the ranks of those who have examined the results of a Jansenist training.

The family councils, while admitting that the ultimate marriage of Jérôme and Alissa is a matter of course, yet decide that a positive betrothal would be injudicious while Jérôme is so young. To this postponement the wishes of Alissa also tend, although the only scruple which she yet acknowledges is the result of her slightly greater age, and the tendency, which he continues to show, to lean unduly on her judgment. The reader is made to perceive that her character is much more fully developed, and set on a much firmer basis, than that of her cousin. Jérôme meanwhile proceeds into the world; he studies for a profession in Paris; he goes through his

turn of military service at Nancy; he engages in a long journey through Italy. All these events, by a natural process of experience, enlarge his intelligence, explain to him the meaning of life, modify his judgments on mankind. His pure and devoted passion for Alissa, nevertheless, is subject to no real diminution, although absence and physical change obscure and sometimes make difficult the expression of it. Moreover, it is now almost entirely restricted to correspondence.

While Jérôme sees the world, however, in all its variegated lights and colours, Alissa roams in the shadow of the garden at Fouguesemare. She is wholly occupied in being a mother to her old father and to his family, in attending to her charities and in practising her religion. She grows neither sour nor bitter, but she becomes interpenetrated by the pangs of many exquisite scruples. The mother of Jérôme dies, and on her deathbed desires that she may see the hand of her son close in formal betrothal on the pale hand of Alissa, but the girl cannot persuade herself that she ought to bind her young cousin with any vow; she insists that they should wait until Jérôme is more sure of his own mind. "Comprends," she adds, "que je ne parle que pour toi-même, car pour moi je "crois bien que je ne pourrai jamais cesser de t'aimer." At this moment, infinitely perplexing for the young lover, with his alternatives of docility and exasperation, the mind of Alissa is slowly proceeding in a direction still undetermined to her own consciousness.

From this point, the relation between the lovers becomes more and more tragical. Various incidents, of a nature to enliven very agreeably and naturally the pages of M. Gide, interpose to prolong the inevitable delay, and to separate Jérôme still further from Alissa. These obstacles, however, seem to Jérôme to be exclusively of a material order; his fidelity to his purpose is unshaken, and he never ceases to regard his cousin as his guiding-star. Unfortunately, in the world of Paris and Italy, in the turmoil of literature and society, he finds the instinctive devoutness of his carefully-guarded youth break down in an indifference which he deplores but scarcely tries to resist. Somewhere, Renan makes a very acute remark when he says, in effect, "le plus grand nombre des "hommes a besoin d'un culte à deux degrés." Jérôme, in the advancement of his years, rests more and more wholly upon Alissa for his religious preservation.

His cousin perceives this, and she retires from him. He must live for God by himself, or not at all, and in response to his passionate indignation, he receives a definite dismissal: "Adieu, mon ami. "*Hic incipit amor Dei.* Ah! sauras-tu jamais combien je t'aime. "Jusqu'à la fin je serai ton Alissa." The young lover, more ardent than ever, cannot but conceive that this is a trap laid for his too-way feet. In spite of prudence and duty, he will fly to protest to his

cousin his entire, his unalterable ardour, and he will put an end to a false position, which scruples have made ridiculous, by insisting, at once, on a full and open ceremony of betrothal. He arrives, incontinently, at Fougucusemare, where the family receive him with enthusiasm, but only to find Alissa singularly changed. She avoids all private conversation with him, exhibits what in anyone else would seem the evidences of coldness or disdain, and feigns,—for it can but be feigning,—to misunderstand every suggestion and every protest he makes. This mysterious situation culminates at length in another scene, at a subsequent and final visit to his uncle's house. Alissa now no longer shrinks from being alone with her cousin; she desires him to see her as she is. She presents herself to him very dowdily dressed, without any ornament; she takes him into her private room, whence all her pictures and her books have disappeared, “remplacés uniquement par d'insignifiants petits “ouvrages de piété vulgaire pour lesquels j'espérais qu'elle n'avait “que du mépris.” He finds her altered in mind, in taste, in appearance; she has become wilfully colourless and dull; she has followed the cruel counsel of the theologian—*abêtissez-vous!* and to the protestations of Jérôme's anger and despair she replies with a gentle indifference. “‘Laisse-moi vite,’ dit-elle,—et comme s'il ne “s'était agi que d'un jeu: ‘Nous reprendrons cette conversation “plus tard.’”

The conversation is not resumed, and soon after this Alissa fades into a decline and dies. Her journals give evidence of a consuming passion for Jérôme, against which she has contended, vainly stoical, to the end. I do not know where to find elsewhere in recent fiction so pathetic a portrait of a saint as M. Gide gives us in Alissa Bucolin. She is like one of the religious women that the Sieneese painters of the fifteenth century loved to represent, shadowless and pale, with the flame of sanctification already quivering on their foreheads; or like Santa Fina, as Ghirlandajo conceived her at San Gimignano, already lost to earth, “un fruit de souffrance” crushed into the cup of God's infinite mercy. But where the extreme skill of the author of “La Porte Étroite” is displayed is in the fact that while no element of Alissa's progress in holiness is caricatured or exaggerated, while every symptom of it is recorded with a perfect sympathy for herself and recognition of her aims, it is not with approval that M. Gide writes. We have not here a consecrated Huysmans vapouring about the ecstasies of St. Lydwine of Schiedam, but a man of modern training, clear-eyed and cool, who entirely appreciates the nature of the error he so closely describes, and regards it with deep disapprobation. The sacrifice which Alissa makes to scruple and to faith is a vain sacrifice, futile and wretched, a tribute to that religion “against nature, against happiness, against common sense,” which is the final outcome of Puritanism. But to all such arguments,

surely there is no better reply than the old, familiar one of "Mimnermus in Church":

Forsooth the present we must give
 To that which cannot pass away;
 All beauteous things for which we live
 By laws of time and space decay.
 But oh, the very reason why
 I clasp them, is because they die:

Among recent imaginative writers, M. Gide is perhaps the most obstinately individualist. No subject interests him so deeply as the study of conscience, and in one of his early volumes I find this charming phrase, petulantly thrown forth to annoy the Philistines,—*"Chacun est plus précieux que tous."* Nothing vexes M. Gide so much as the illogical limits which modern discipline lays down for the compression of the human will. He has written in *L'Immoraliste* what I admit is an extremely painful study of the irritation and misery caused by a too-definite divergence from the comfortable type. He is impatient of the worry which is brought about by moral and religious abstractions, and this I take to be the central idea pervading some of his strictly symbolical work, such as the strange drama of *Le Roi Candaule* and the stranger extravaganza of *Philoctète*. These are books which will never be popular, which are even provoking in their defiance of popularity, which, moreover, bear the stamp of the petulance of youth, but which will always attract the few by the remoteness of their vision and the purity of their style.

The strength of M. Gide's genius consists, I believe, in the delicate firmness of his touch as an analyst. He has no interest in groups, or types; his eye is fixed on the *elected* spirit, on the ethical exception. One of his characters in *Le Prométhée Mal-Enchaîné* exclaims, "Les personnalités, il n'y a que cela d'intéressant; et puis 'les relations entre personnalités!'" We have here the strait gate through which the author takes all his imaginary figures, and if their conventionality has so flattened them out that they cannot pass the test, he flings them from him. It is a most encouraging matter to the admirers of M. Gide that his progress as an artist has been definite and steady. He has grown from year to year in his sense of harmony, in his sympathy with human existence. In his early books, he gave a certain impression of hostility to ordinary life; his personal attitude was a little arrogant, tending a little to lawless eccentricity. The beautiful human pages of *La Porte Étroite* show how completely he has outgrown this wilful oddity of aim.

We have said that M. André Gide is more closely attuned in many respects to the English than to the French spirit. This is true, if we regard his attitude as a little belated. Since 1900 our native

authors have adopted a vociferous tone which is certainly not that of *La Porte Étroite*. English literature has, in this twentieth century, set up a megaphone in the market-place, and the prize is for him (or her) who shouts the loudest. But when we say that M. Gide is in sympathy with English ideas, it is of a slightly earlier period that we are thinking. He is allied with such tender individualists of the close of the nineteenth century as Shorthouse and Pater. Those who delight in the contrast between types of character, exhibited with great dexterity by a most accomplished hand, will follow the literary career of M. André Gide with curiosity.

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