The Protestant Barrès

Strait Is the Gate, by André Gide. Translated from the French by Madame Simon Bussy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. $2.50.

WHEN André Gide's first book, Les Cahiers d'André Walter, appeared anonymously in 1891, the initiated, who knew who the author was, nicknamed him "the Protestant Barrès." No more remarkable first book has come out of France in this generation except that of Maurice Barrès, Sous l'Œil des Barbares, which had preceded Gide by three years. Hence the analogy suggested between these two writers, the antithesis of each other, each of whom was to become a leader of the younger generation, according to the taste and temperament of their disciples.

Having rapidly transformed himself from the interesting and stimulating individualist of those early novels of Le Culte du Moi, into a hundred percent Nationalist patriot, a French Babbitt, so to speak, Maurice Barrès very naturally loomed more prominently in the public eye and in the public prints than André Gide. To his literary influence, based upon a style which survived even the cheapest claptrap of his later years, he added the mob-prestige of the chauvinist politician. Unlike Barrès, Gide was one of the first to propose an intelligent intellectual understanding with Germany. But here again he was unlike Barrès, for he made no effort to reach the masses. He might have shared the humanitarian limelight with Romain Rolland, or the radical amplifier of Barbusse. Characteristically, he appealed only to the few.

The inconsequential fame of politicians is such, that Barrès is at least a name, I imagine, to many people in this country who have never heard of Gide. So far as translation is concerned, neither author has hitherto been adequately represented. Lady Rothermere translated Gide's Prometheus Ill-bound a few years ago, and Colette Baudoche brought Barrès into English on the wave of war-time sentiment, but, to all intents and purposes, the two literary leaders of contemporary France exist only for those who read them in the original. There has been no perceptible excitement since André Gide's Porte Etroite appeared, in the excellent translation of Mrs. Dorothy Bussy, as Strait is the Gate. The translation has been made under the author's supervision, for he knows English well, and has translated Conrad, Blake, and Tagore. It so adequately reflects the sober charm of the French that it will be unnecessary to cite it as an excuse for whatever neglect may be the fate of Gide in America.

In 1909, when La Porte Etroite had just been published, Edmund Gosse thought that Gide was "the most interesting man of letters under the age of fifty," and said that "his mind is more closely attuned to English ideas, or what once were English ideas, than that of any other living writer of France." From which he assumed that the writings of André Gide should have a special interest for English-speaking readers. Whether that assumption is sound, this translation of "one of the most beautiful works which have been printed in English for a long time"—to quote Mr. Gosse—will prove. The great Protestant names in French literary history are, for the most part, Swiss, and in modern French literature there are only two Protestant writers of note, Pierre Loti and André Gide. In the former there is no trace of his religious origins, which were never, I suspect, very deep, but in Gide's Protestantism is a vital part of his work. As Mr. Gosse says, it enables us "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 immense and elusive variety of his work makes classification difficult: the early sentimental and æsthetic meditations, Les Cahiers d'André Walter and Les Nourritures Terrestres; their sequels, in a sense, Prétextes and Nouveaux Prétextes, two most original volumes of literary criticism, to which may be added his recent monograph on Dostoievsky and the brochures on Wilde and Charles Louis Philippe; the plays, le Roi Candaule and Saül; the philosophic dialogues and stories, belonging to his Symbolist period, or written in that mood, Le Voyage d'Urien and the six "treatises" now collected in Le Retour de l'Enfant Prodigue; finally, miscellaneous volumes of travel sketches and impressions of the assize courts. From this variegated background his novels stand out, but he refuses to call them by that name. Those which best correspond to the ordinary meaning of the term are the four "récits": L'Immoraliste, La Porte Etroite, Isabelle and La Symphonie Pastorale; then come the three "soties": Paludes, Le Prométhée Mal Enchaîné and Les Caves du Vatican; upon these the claims of André Gide must finally rest.

With the exception of Paludes, a truly delightful satire on the introspective intellectual, which has a peculiar aptness today, although written in 1895, the group of fantasias which Gide has classified with the mediæval farces of his own country, are not so perfect achievements as the four "narratives," to which he refuses the title of novels. Les Caves du Vatican, which appeared just on the eve of the Great War, is a curious compound of detective fiction, social satire, fantastic comedy and picaresque adventure. It has had a vogue with readers who seem utterly indifferent to the author's earlier and more characteristic work. Had La Symphonie Pastorale not come later to show Gide once more in his true vein, as the analyst of the Protestant soul, one might have concluded that he had set out, in his maturity, to follow a course which had tempted him in his youth. As it is, this strange, turbulent book, full of the disorder of an era on the point of closing, stands out as an exceptional work, another example of Gide's astonishing versatility. That versatility had a surprise in store for us in Isabelle, also, the story immediately preceding Les Caves du Vatican. It is a tale, in the manner of Barbey d'Aurevilly, of the mystery lurking in an old château where a young student comes to consult certain old manuscripts, and stumbles upon a passionate drama, involving the ruin of a noble family.

By common consent, L'Immoraliste and La Porte Etroite are Gide's masterpieces. Here he has studied those cases of conscience which are peculiarly the product of Protestant morality, the psychology of those who are bound and shackled by that very freedom of religious thought which once seemed to be the very essence of all liberty. The emancipated Huguenot in Gide is attracted by those problems which postulate for their statement and solution experiences such as he himself must have known. His Immoralist, for example, is the paragon of God-fearing virtue, who has turned away from life and love to find a substitute for living in books and ideas. His virtues are all negative, and thus he passes for an exemplary character. He becomes immoral when, as a result of a serious illness, he creeps back from the edge of death

with the realization that his ideals are false. Henceforth he will seek life in all its most vital and energetic manifestations, spontaneity and vigor are now more to him than the cautious qualities which he had once so sadly overestimated. He divests himself of everything that constituted his former self. His wife's illness and death leave him unmoved, pity is gone out of him, and his craving for the strong and full-blooded sends him off in search of adventures among thieves and poachers and drunkards. All his inhibitions are released, all his values are transvalued, and he is carried away on the dark stream of primitive life.

Strait is the Gate is another study of asceticism, "a searching analysis," as Mr. Gosse calls it, "of the incompleteness and narrowness of the moral psychology of Protestantism." Alissa Bucolin, the child of a Creole mother and a respectable Huguenot banker in Havre, is possessed by that dual heritage and finally destroyed by it. Her inverted romanticism, like her neurotic beauty, may be traced to that languorous, exotic figure, so ill-adapted to the staid Protestant society of the provinces, whose lovers and nervous crises leave their indelible impressions upon the minds of the grave young Huguenot children whose story is told. These are Alissa, her younger sister and brother, Juliette and Robert, and Jérôme, her cousin, whom she is to marry, according to the family understanding. A childish adventure of Jérôme's with his amorous Aunt Bucolin, and one day the revelation to Alissa of her mother's far from spiritual loves, drive deep into these little puritan souls the conviction of sin and shame. At church the preacher's fulminations against those who seek the broad path leading to destruction are recognized as references to the wickedness of the wild creature from Martinique, who has run away with one of her lovers, and Jerôme and Alissa decide that the strait gate and the narrow way shall be their goal.

Alissa's love for Jérôme is to her mind the chief obstacle to salvation, and it is in a sort of ascetic ecstasy that she sets out to kill this emotion, so contaminated, as she has seen, by things of the earth earthy. Juliette also loves Jérôme, and Alissa tries at first to profit by this opportunity to sacrifice herself in favor of her sister. But Juliette defeats her by marrying an elderly wine-grower, whom she does not love particularly, but with whom she leads an active and happy domestic life. To Alissa this is further proof of the treacherous insignificance of human passion, and renunciation becomes more and more the ideal. Jérôme, meanwhile, has gone off to study in Paris, he has done his military service and has travelled. Life has opened out before him and he has gradually freed himself from the dogmas and superstitions of his youth; his faith, never so profound as Alissa's, cannot live without hers, and she denies him that support with truly pious severity; he must seek his own salvation. But his love for Alissa survives every change; he returns home determined to have their betrothal announced. Alissa repulses him for the last time, and, when she goes into decline and dies, he learns from her diary how she wrestled against what an Irish bishop once called "the degrading passion of love," and died without surrender or victory.

André Gide has written nothing so harmonious and so finished as this variation upon one of the great themes of tragedy, renunciation in pursuit of perfection. He is in the great tradition of Racine and Corneille when he here combines a spiritual purity of classic style with the heroic tension of a mystic soul's torturing quest and the tortuous self-questionings of exalted piety. Alissa Bucolin is the portrait of a Protestant saint, drawn with a sympathy and insight as profound as the author's disapproval of the aberration he has studied. This holiness is truly Protestant in its bleak, self-sufficient humility, its self-reliant dependence upon personal conviction and conscience. It is analyzed with a truly Huguenot simplicity, which Edmund Gosse contrasts with "a consecrated Huysmans vapouring about the ecstasies of St. Lydwine of Schiedam." Alissa's diary has already supplied pages which have an honorable place in anthologies of the best modern French prose.

Strait is the Gate is deservedly the book which made André Gide famous; it is one of the great classics of French fiction since the death of Flaubert. It is not only a study of puritanism, in the authentic lineage of Gosse's Father and Son, it is a fine picture of an unfamiliar corner of French provincial life, full of remarkable character-drawing and lively incidents and observations. As the author of that widely different but kindred work has said of Gide: "there is something northern about his genius, which loves to cultivate caprices and the twilight hours. . . He is allied with such tender individualists of the close of the nineteenth century as Shorthouse and Pater." His influence in France today is such that he may well mark the transition to a new orientation of the French mind.

ERNEST BOYD.

Russia's Revolution

The First Time in History, by Anna Louise Strong. New York: Boni and Liveright. $2.00.

FIRST and last we have heard a good deal about Russia and her revolution. They have been served up, in report and interview, in lecture and book, in all sorts of ways and by all sorts of persons—emigrés and emissaries; self-constituted investigators, with their "authoritative accounts," and favored travelers, with their "intimate views;" economic "defenders of the faith" (laus Deo!) and economic heretics (anathema sint!)—men of big business, and men of small politics; everyone has had his chance at Russia. We have had the "truth about Russia," the "facts about Russia," the "real Russia," "Russia as it is"—what more do we want or need? Why another book on Russia, and what justification, beyond the "inner urge," has anyone for writing another?

Well, that depends pretty much upon the book and who writes it. The author of The First Time in History can establish her title to write and her claim to a reading on many grounds—residence in Russia of more than two years; journeys into various parts of the country; relief work and nursing during famine and plague; contacts and conversations with all sorts and conditions of people, high and low, peasants, workmen, soldiers, officials, priests, teachers; first-hand knowledge of many things of which she herself was an active part.

But it is not these experiences which, after all, constitute her chief qualification for writing upon Russia. For, interesting as they are, and vividly narrated, they are, nevertheless, not unique. Others too have been in Russia, have seen much and have told much. Dr. Strong's story is indeed informing, and fills in at many points our all