

A New Novel by André Gide

PARIS. THE new book which M. André Gide entitles "L'école des Femmes" is not Molière's famous comedy; nor is it a study of the sort that M. René Doumic, Perpetual Secretary of the French Academy, has published on "Le Misanthrope." It is a novel, and owes its title to a certain analogy between its subject and that treated by the great writer of comedies. The plots are dissimilar, André Gide's having no Arnolphe, but merely, like Molière's, touching upon the question of education for girls. Fénelon and many others, including Stendhal, have concerned themselves with it—without putting an end to the discussion which, as in the case of most great problems, is everlasting.

André Gide's heroine, Eveline, comes of a good bourgeois family and has been brought up according to the old system; the story opens at the end of the last cen-

tury, in 1894. She has received very little education except in the art of pleasing others; she can play the piano quite well, but knows hardly anything else. She has been inculcated with the principles of piety, respect and submission.

She is the ingénue of long ago, and almost what M. Marcel Prévost once called "la petite oie blanche," except that Eveline's simplicity is only temporary, due to her training. But she does not break her ban, as Molière's Agnes did; for one thing, her position is not quite so sequestered, for the times have changed. Besides, we do not know what happens to Agnes later: She may become a Célémène or even worse, and may eventually deceive Horace as she did Arnolphe. Eveline's "whiteness," on the other hand, is unquestionably genuine and resists all discoloration.

IN 1894, therefore, Eveline marries a fine young man, Robert; this despite her father's objections which she ascribes to prejudice, as he is an anti-Clerical and the young man a Catholic—and with the consent of her pious mother and of her confessor, the Abbé Bredel. She is profoundly impressed by Robert and admires him as much as she loves him. In healthy people, for that matter, these two sentiments go together. To her, accordingly, her Robert is a superior being, one destined to become great. Her sole wish is to devote herself to him entirely and to help him in the great tasks he will surely undertake. She will live for him alone, but will find it quite proper for him to live for his work and his mission primarily.

What a delightful creature she is, this dear little Eveline! This was the rôle of women as understood in those days; and, on the whole, that view worked out very well, both for their own happiness and for the welfare of the community. What could they do better than love their husbands, bear them children, assure them of a pleasant home and, as faithful helpmeets, assist them as much as possible? Very modest, Eveline fears only that she is not good enough for Robert, beside whom she feels herself to be ignorant and insignificant. Poor Eveline!

This old conjugal code assumes that the husband is worthy of it; that is, he must, at the very least,



La Grande-Chartreuse.

From "Picturesque France" (Bouilland's).

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be a perfectly upright man and, to measure up to Eveline's dreams, a truly eminent personality. But alas! Her man turns out to be an ordinary mortal.

He is no monster, neither vicious nor disreputable; that, indeed, would have been an exceptional accident highly improbable in this case, for Eveline's family took the precaution of inquiring about Robert, and establishing that he was what is generally considered an excellent catch. His life and habits were good, his family respectable, his financial position comfortable and even approaching wealth, according to European standards. These were the reasons why Eveline's father finally yielded, his original antipathy notwithstanding.

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THIS Robert, however, personifies a type we meet very frequently, and which enjoys general esteem, but is detestable nonetheless. He is a climber and a Pharisee, full of intrigues and oratory. Fine words flow incessantly from his lips: He harangues and preaches, speaks continuously of duty and religion, boasts of thinking only of serving his convictions—of which, however, he makes use, with never a scruple, for his own advancement. He

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finds a literary journal whose political department he heads, and which he uses only to please those whom he wishes to make his friends, or to intimidate and silence his opponents.

He is not exactly a Tartuffe. He commits no positively criminal acts; indeed, one cannot even bring definite proof of his insincerity. But—as if by chance—his views are always those which would be of the greatest advantage to himself. He is incapable of a single really disinterested thought. He is a dummy, a mere shell whose ridiculous emptiness strikes no one but Eveline—and this only after a long time, when it is already too late. The public does not notice Robert's baseness, for he is a mediocrity of an ordinary type.

To expose him a clear-sighted and energetic Alceste would be needed. And nothing can be stranger or more adorable than Eveline's Alcestism—the result of her purity of soul and lofty morality, which do not diminish her feminine sweetness and softness, and which enable her to judge Robert but not to break with him. She leaves him only in order to nurse patients suffering from contagious diseases, and she dies for having endeavored to reach the truth. But perhaps her education had its advantages—André Gide has given us a beautiful and fine book.

PATRICK SQUIDAY.