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Paris Can Be Quite Victorian

The School for Wives, by Andre Gide. Translated from the French by Dorothy Bussy. \$2. (Alfred A. Knopf.)

Anyone who supposed, as we Americans are quite likely to suppose, that Paris has always been a gay place, and unexceptionally, will already have been disillusioned by "Pomp and Circumstance," the memoirs of the Baroness of Clermont-Tonnerre, where it is shown that even a quite rich young girl of 30 years ago was in luck if she had any good times at all. And will therefore not be surprised in reading "The School for Wives" to find that Eveline, the heroine, was a Victorian young miss if there ever was one, and Robert, her lover, so much more Victorian that you can scarcely imagine him without sidewhisikers.

Even the family situation is Victorian. Father is something of a free thinker, and makes ridiculous excuses rather than be forced into five minutes with the cure. Mother is a conformist in all things. And Eveline is the well behaved daughter. In April, 1908, her father took her to Florence for the Easter holidays, where as it happened she met Robert. Her description of the pension table runs thus: "None of the guests were disagreeable, but Robert's distinction outshone all the others. He sat opposite my father, who is rather reserved and often not very affable to people who are not in his set. As we were the last comers, it was natural enough for us not to take part in the conversation at once. Personally, I should have liked to talk, but I couldn't very well be more forthcoming than papa; so I was just as reserved as he, and as I was sitting next him, our silence made a kind of little island of coldness in the midst of the general animation."

The diary from which this is an excerpt is one that Robert had asked her to keep as a record of their love. He was to keep one, too. Eveline's first disillusionment comes when Robert insists upon reading hers, and then instead of showing her his makes known the fact that he hasn't kept one at all. Before that, Robert had been perfection, even when he took exception to her grammar and behavior. After that, of course, she stops the diary. But takes it up again some years later. Whereupon it appears that Robert had never been anything but a husk of fine ideas stated so often that he had more than convinced himself that he really held them. Or, as papa put it, while there was yet time: "Robert has taken you all in—the abbe and your mamma and you—himself, too, I am afraid, which is more serious."

At the last, Eveline, if any longer, attempts husk and in some way get real Robert. But the husk is puncture proof. Then a lot of fine speeches to boys who are going to die. He gets a croix de guerre which confirms him in his favor of himself that Eveline and gets a job nursing ceases.

All of which may not be the sort of book that you of Andre Gide. But they never are.

SUSAN