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### French Pastry

*L'Ecole des Femmes*, by André Gide. Nouvelle Revue Française. Paris.  
*La Seconde*, by Colette. Ernest Flammarion. Paris.

IT might have been expected that the recent emergence of Berlin as a cultural center equal, if not superior, to Paris in importance, would have a stimulating effect on France. Instead, the converse seems to be true, at least in so far as literature is concerned: the effect, if there has been an effect at all, has been to stifle whatever strength and virility contemporary French writing possessed. As a usual thing France could be counted on to produce one or two intelligent books either of fiction or criticism each season; this year one searches in vain through the crop for something to get excited about, finding only Julian Green's "Leviathan" and Cocteau's "Les Enfants Terribles," the first of which is essentially the work of an American, despite his earnest efforts to appear the contrary, and the second of which, while authentic enough and clever enough as a pathological case history of onanism, comes perilously near to being morbid rubbish. Aside from these two books, the rest is either all rubbish or dullness, or both. The two literary figures to whom one has been accustomed to look first, since the death of Proust, for work of first-rate craftsmanship and style and intelligence, Gide and Colette, have both labored, it is true. But they have

brought forth only mice, two very small mice indeed. M. Gide's failure is the more disappointing of the two because he is unquestionably the most important novelist in France today and because at last there can be but little doubt as to his limitations. "L'Ecole des Femmes" (singularly inept as a title in this case) purports to be the diary of an ingenuous and solemn young woman who falls in love with a fatuous prig and eventually, after twenty years of married life, discovers how very fatuous he is. The reader, unfortunately, discovers it before he has finished three pages. One suspects that M. Gide, in attempting to answer the widespread criticism that he has never yet succeeded in creating a female character who lived and breathed in his pages, would have been wiser to have left well enough alone: certainly Eveline, the protagonist, does nothing to disprove the justice of the criticism. The most charitable thing that can be said about her is that she was a simpleton who was lucky to find even Robert, humorless and pretentious bore that he was, for a husband. Neither of them, Eveline or Robert, contributes so much as a mite to the sum total of recorded human experience or knowledge; nor, for the first time in a long and distinguished career as a man of letters, does M. Gide.

The people in "La Seconde" are worse. M. Gide's failure is at least an honest one, whereas Mme. Colette appears not to have labored at all in creating her latest batch of Parisians. Either she was in a careless mood, or lazy, or over-sanguine of the results of her long delayed introduction to the land of dollars; certainly she took no pains with them; they remain always two dimensional, banal, and faintly reminiscent of Elinor Glyn. The wife of a successful playwright befriends her husband's secretary and allows her to live with them; inevitably the secretary becomes the mistress of the playwright and still goes on living in the home. The theme is the familiar one of divided loyalties, but they are loyalties which never quite come off, which are presented too sketchily, too superficially, ever to seem convincing. Moreover, the rich fecundity of style, the unashamed animality and femaleness which has characterized Colette's writing in the past, transforming her material, no matter whether it dealt with birds and bees in Normandy or scandalous old harlots in Paris, into a thing of genuine, earthy beauty, is sadly absent here. From "La Blé en Herbe" to "La Seconde" is a long, long way in retrogression: it is even a long way from "Chéri," which the United States is now discovering in pitifully inadequate translation.

Reading such books as these, one wonders why France refuses seriously to discover the War. It is a singular fact that alone of the countries which were permanently and deeply affected by the aftermath of Sarajevo, France has produced no notable fictional or dramatic treatment of war since the Armistice. "Le Feu" still remains her one first-rate contribution to war literature (perhaps, after ten years, "Le Feu" has ceased to be first-rate; I cannot say). While novels and plays and movie scenarios, good and bad, are tumbling head over heels out of Germany and England and the United States, France has only to offer an inconsiderable book by Roland Dorgèlès and "Le Tombeau sous l'Arc de Triomphe," a sensational drama in verse; she remains dismally and stubbornly shut up in her ivory tower of sex; sex intellectualized or sentimentalized or specialized, but always sex. It cannot be very long now before all that is important on the subject will have been definitively said, and there will be nothing more to say.

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