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Portrait of a Fraud.

THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES. By
André Gide. Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50

By C. HARTLEY GRATTAN.

M. André Gide offers in "The School for Wives" a light but revelatory example of his technical facility. In 117 small pages he dissects a character neatly. It is as expert a job as that of any experienced entomologist in preserving a butterfly. The specimen is preserved complete, labeled, classified, and ready for inspection.

The technic is so expert that it naturally has first claim on the reader's attention. One is much more apt to say "How clever," than "How profound." For above all M. Gide is clever. A man of letters in the narrow sense, he knows just how to do the job with the fewest false motions.

The type he presents is hardly unusual in life and hardly unknown to literature. But no one, to my knowledge, has ever put it so neatly on paper. Yet take M. Gide's devices and look at them carefully, and one is forced to the conclusion that he has gone to quite unnecessary trouble to dress up his narrative with encumbering hocus-pocus. Spare and exact as it is, it is tricked out in false trappings.

He reveals the character through the fragmentary diary of the woman who marries him. She is thoroughly taken in and considers herself unworthy of such a moral paragon. Yet so cleverly has Gide handled even the earliest entries in her diary that the reader is aware of the character's essential worthlessness from the beginning. Years later, after the birth of two children, she comes to a realization that her judgment was wrong. She sees through him. Wrought up to the pitch of wishing to leave him for good and all, she discovers that she can find no one to sympathize with her except her own daughter. Retaining some remnants of conventional morality, she is reluctant to admit to her daughter that she, too, knows her husband to be a fraud, and she is shocked and disillusioned to discover that the fan- tasy Abbé values outward appearance beyond inward reality, and has no consolation for her.

She watches her husband act his part even in the extremity of near death. She sees him exploit his patriotism in war time, and save his skin by doing his duty through talking behind the lines. And she resolves to solve her problem by going as a nurse in a contagious hospital. She contracts an illness and dies.

A slight story but a clever one. As to the hocus-pocus, I am at a loss to see what necessitated the pretense that this book was communicated to Gide by the daughter of the woman victimized by this "socially desirable" fraud. And why further pretend that the title was suggested by the daughter?

The sheer cleverness of the writing and the analysis should have put such childishness out of the author's mind. The only excuse that I can think of is that it gave greater intimacy to the portrayal. But even that is a dubious excuse for a shopworn literary device.

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