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Les Faux Monnayeurs

THE COUNTERFEITERS

THE COUNTERFEITERS. Translated from the French of ANDRÉ GIDE by DOROTHY Bussy. (Knopf, 10s. 6d. net.)

The novel is an extremely interesting subject, and in any discussion of it several pleasing half-philosophical problems, elementary but insoluble, are certain to arise. What, for example, is the nature of that reality which the novelist usually seeks either to lay bare or to construct? There may be different kinds of reality, or, again, it may be that the novelist should not concern himself with reality, but should produce a pure work of art. We should expect that M. Gide, while writing his first novel, would go into all this, and certainly his novel could not well be like any other novel. M. Gide has clearly thought over all these problems, and in the end they are presented in a novel which is like a nest of Chinese boxes, or like a play within a play within a play, as in William Morris's "Love is Enough." In "Les Faux Monnayeurs" there is a novelist, Edouard, writing a novel also about counterfeiters, and he discusses his aims as a novelist. We are reminded at times of the curious problem of the relation of Clissold to Mr. H. G. Wells. At one point Edouard reads from his novel to a character in M. Gide's novel in order to influence him. Two events in the two novels are similar and react on each other. At another point Edouard is talking of false coins, and a character in M. Gide's novel takes out an actual false coin, which "puts out" Edouard. Moreover, Edouard explains that the subject of his novel will be "the rivalry between the real world and the representation of it which we make to ourselves." He keeps a journal in which he notes down facts which he may work into his novel, and speculates how he may use them. Incidentally this journal, casually quoted whenever convenient, assists M. Gide in his effort to break down that elaborate sewing together of

everything which is so much a trouble to a novelist. "Les Faux Monnayeurs" does not, at any rate in its construction, seek to imitate that reality or probability in the telling, at which other novelists labour.

Possibly M. Gide hopes to conjure up reality by contrasting things more and less real. Sometimes these contrasts are too violent, as when he introduces an angel. The angel symbolizes the conscience, no doubt, or the guiding star of one of the characters, but it is also another kind of reality or unreality, another contrast. The whole thing is made even more complex by the Journal des Faux Monnayeurs, for M. Gide, like Edouard, has kept a journal while writing a novel, which he has published. But whether or no reality is to be conjured by these methods—and it may possibly be that these elaborate contrasts do in some way assist the form of the novel and tie it together—it is very natural that a literary man who is not a novelist—not a story-teller who hopes that some beauty may come, he does not know how or why, out of his story telling—should when writing his first novel present these curious problems. They are profoundly interesting to anyone who speculates about the novel. There is this kind of reality, M. Gide says, and there is that; which is more real? It is as if an art critic could take a vast canvas and adumbrate in it all the different aims of painting, practical but contradictory aesthetics. But contradiction, if there is contradiction, does not matter. Edouard writes down some views on the novel one day in his journal, and the next day he says that they are nonsense. We cannot expect M. Gide to say whether the views are really nonsense, since the novelist is surely not answerable for views expressed by his characters.

But there is a novel as well as practical aesthetics in "Les Faux Monnayeurs." It is quite possible to separate the story from the practical aesthetics as one reads. It is a very good story, one might say a good novel. It is in the manner of Dostoevsky, but the over-

whelming speed, the breathless haste at which the Russians live is slowed down. Nevertheless, there is the same method of viewing life. A strange and terrible incident is contrasted with a strange and meaningless incident, thus proving one does not know what, perhaps some philosophy of life. We feel that something very important is being shown to us, and we cannot see why it is important. The main theme of the story, which appears at the same time almost to be an under-current, is the tragic adventures of a group of school-boys. They, in a mysterious and muddled way, explore all the vices of childhood, forming a kind of secret society for this end. They pass false coins as well, and in the end a little boy is persuaded by his companions to commit suicide. It is a very terrible story, and the mystery with which childish vices are surrounded to grow-up people is admirably represented. There are also young men who are rather mysterious, though in the same sort of way as Prince Myshtkin, for example, is mysterious; and though one cannot quite see why they should be mysterious, it may be because the world is to them, as is very well shown by M. Gide, a mystery. M. Gide has a happy way of explaining precisely what a character is feeling and yet making us think that we have not by any means got to the bottom of that character. Only the older men are perfectly transparent; and their frailties are so ruthlessly exposed that we feel as if M. Gide were looking through a brick wall to what is not by any means all that is on the other side. They are too transparent. But M. Gide's women, especially Pauline, the wife of a bourgeois who is ruthlessly exposed, are admirably real, neither too mysterious nor too transparent. Perhaps it may be thought that M. Gide says too plainly what Dostoevsky implies: "Well; that is what life is like." Mme. Bussy's translation is admirable, both because it may easily and with pleasure be read as if there were no original and because it is very accurate.