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LAFCADIO'S ADVENTURES

Under the title LAFCADIO'S ADVENTURES (Knopf, 7s. 6d. net) Mme. Dorothy Bussy has translated M. André Gide's "Les Caves du Vatican" into excellent English. All the characteristics of M. Gide as a storyteller are here exaggerated and crowded together, except that slightly sentimental beauty which is most marked in "Si le Grain ne Meurt." Such beauty is indeed a strange contrast to this farcical novel, for nothing could be more rigidly farcical than this, and it is the farce of a ruthlessly clever man. The jokes are often of the kind which admit of no explanation and make one laugh a little uneasily, as if there was still some meaning which might be found behind the pointlessness which seems to be their whole point. Yet it is probable that these jokes consist in nothing but the conjunction of incongruities, meaning nothing and with scarcely a trace of satire. Yet the subject is one that would easily lend itself to satire: for M. Gide writes of a supposed plot of the Freemasons by which they had captured the Pope and put him in prison while they set up a sham Pope for their own purposes.

Like Flaubert, M. Gide makes an abstract pleasure of the most rigid purity in the adventures of two incomparably stupid men, with the fantastic names of Blafaphus and Fleurissoire. It is perhaps no very remarkable feat to laugh even in the most detached manner at stupidity, and when Fleurissoire sets out to rescue the Pope this is easily enjoyable and most suitable. But disaster of the most pitiable kind overtakes his adventure, and still M. Gide's farce continues. His humour is quite cold and perfectly implacable, and it can take murder in its stride. The murder is quite pointless, it is very odd, and it shows how odd human beings are. Moreover, it leads to more surprising incongruities and to a welter of stupidity and misunderstanding, so that this is all that we should expect of it. One may complain that murder is a sorry business, as one may have complained that miracles like that which occurs at the beginning of the book are most unusual, and one may ask for some explanation or comment. But M. Gide is far too ingenious to give us this and far too disinterested a humorist. The French have given us the most rigidly formal painting and verse, and their newest contribution to the pleasures of some and the discomforts of others is that of rigidly formal humour. One does not object to the martyrdom of St. Sebastian in the cause of Italian painting, and so one should not object to the martyrdom of Fleurissoire in the cause of humour.

21 Mars 1929