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# WORLD OF BOOKS.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE BLIND.

"La Symphonie Pastorale." Par André Gide. 15 francs. (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française.)

"Le Père Humilié." Par Paul Claudel. 7 francs. (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française.)

By EDMUND GOSSE.

The lamentable spectacle of blindness with which the War has made us dreadfully familiar has led to a very wide discussion of the means by which life may be rendered endurable and even enjoyable to these victims of the cruelty of man to man. But the particular form of blindness which has simultaneously occupied the attention of two of the most eminent writers now living is not that caused by the mutilations of the battlefield. Both M. Gide and M. Claudel weave their story round cases of infantile ophthalmia, in one case curable at an advanced age, in the other not.

Ever since another Frenchman, Louis IX, began, in the thirteenth century, to pay attention to the melancholy fate of the blind there has been some curiosity as to the restrictions and possibilities of those who, to use the Biblical phrase, look out of darkened windows, but it is little more than one hundred years since Edward Rushton—a name ever to be held in honour—started the earliest of those schools for the blind which are happily now so numerous. In each of the remarkable works before me to-day the author's point of departure is scarcely pathological, but ethical. Each writer illustrates not merely the effect of the external world on the cloistered intelligence of a blind person, but how the presence of that person may affect those whose sight is sound.

### The Talent of M. Gide.

There is no more exquisite talent now active in Europe than that of M. André Gide. He stands apart from the various schools of authorship, and while he seems to be in occasional sympathy with them all, he is plainly affiliated to none. His own work follows no particular line, and, except in style, it is difficult to see any unity of purpose in the Gide who is paradoxical in "Paludes," whimsical in "L'Enfant Prodigue," farcical in "Les Caves du Vatican," and sinister in "L'Immoraliste." But there is one Gide who shines beyond

all the rest—the delicate and translucent mirror of humility who has given us "La Porte Etroite" and "Isabelle." It is to this facet of the protean moralist that we owe "La Symphonie Pastorale," which must rank with his finest creations in this sphere which is so pre-eminently his own.

The wandering quality in M. Gide is very remarkable; I know no recent writer in whom it is so marked. We observe him in one mood, and we prepare to accompany him; but night comes on, and in the morning he has folded his tent like an Arab and has disappeared. But happily the nomad has a trick of returning, and here to-day he is again, as we like him best, placid, austere and evangelical. Let us take advantage of his momentary return, since to-morrow he will doubtless be off to fresh woods and pastures new.

### A Blind Waif.

The form in which "La Symphonie Pastorale" is conceived is that of extracts from the diary of a Protestant Swiss pastor, whose name is not divulged. He exercises a cure of souls in a mountain village of the Jura, in the canton of Neuchâtel, not far from La Chaux-de-Fond. One afternoon he is called by a child to come to the help of an old woman living in a remote part of his parish, and he drives there immediately in his gig, guided by the child. He finds the old woman already dead and watched by a neighbour. In the corner of the hovel squats what looks like a heap of rags, but proves to be a girl of about fifteen, the niece and last survivor of the old woman's family. The neighbour knows nothing about her, save that she was born blind, and seems to be almost an idiot. She never speaks nor responds to the human voice, this being explained (I think a little lamely) by the statement that her old aunt, being herself stone-deaf, never addressed a word to her. She will have to go to the workhouse or the civic asylum.

An immense pity surges up in the heart of the impulsive and sentimental pastor, and he determines without reflection that he will adopt this waif and stray. He lifts her into his gig, and drives her to his home. She is incapable of response, and sinks like an inert mass at his feet. They arrive at the manse, and then the difficulties of the situation begin to occur to him. His wife, a practical and unimaginative matron, already has difficulty in bringing up their considerable family of boys and girls, and desires nothing so little as a blind, perhaps imbecile, and certainly extremely dirty addition to her charge.

### The Awakening of Consciousness.

However—and this part of the tale is told with extraordinary humour and penetration—Amélie (for that is the name of the pastor's wife) belongs to the class whose bark is worse than their bite. She expatiates in arguments to show that this proposed act of hospitality is preposterous, and that, for her part, five unruly children of her own are as much, and more, than she can put up with. She storms, and the pastor reflects. "As she spoke, some words

of Christ rose from my heart to my lips, but I refrained from repeating them, for I have always thought it unseemly to shelter my conduct behind the authority of the Holy Scriptures." Wisely he lets Amélie rave; presently her own native benevolence asserts itself, and after various vicissitudes of temper and despair her motherly instinct gets the upper hand, and she begins to take a pleasure in making the best of Gertrude, for that they decide is to be the blind orphan's name.

But while Amélie and the children find the newcomer more and more a subject of interest, the flame of the pastor's romantic zeal sinks into the ashes of disappointment. The indifference of the child, her obstinate obtuseness, and particularly the hard expression which comes over her face when any one approaches her, reward all kindness with hostility. A famous surgeon from the Val Travers is summoned, and tells the family at the manse that they have no cause for despair. The physical and moral development of the poor girl are alike retarded, but her blindness is her only positive defect. The pastor now patiently

begins her education, in which he follows the celebrated example of Laura Bridgman, and his success is continuous and complete.

### The Pastoral Symphony.

The parallel is to Gertrude's advantage, for it will be remembered that the marvellous American was not merely blind but a deaf-mute as well. The difficulty in Laura's case, a difficulty which long seemed insuperable, was that of penetrating to consciousness at all where every communicating sensation, except touch, was absent. But the resemblance of M. Gide's sympathetic heroine to Laura Bridgman consists in the rapidity with which her native intelligence responds to persistent stimulus from without. The pastor is indefatigable, and as his pupil expands and responds, her claim upon his tender care develops into an absorbing affection, the nature of which he is too naive to perceive. It does not, however, escape the jealous attention of Amélie, nor the curiosity of his own eldest son, who is only a year older than Gertrude.

A climax is reached; the blind girl is about eighteen years of age, when the pastor takes her into Neuchâtel to a concert, where the Pastoral Symphony is performed. The music exercises an overwhelming effect upon Gertrude's senses, and seems to break down the last moral and intellectual barrier between her and the normal world, her blindness only excepted. She is like one drowned in ecstasy, and she asks, "Is what you see really as beautiful as that?" the harmonies of the composer having painted for her, as it were, a new world, not as we see it, but ineffable in innocence and purity. These transcendental emotions merely inflame to a still higher pitch the passion of the unfortunate and self-deluded pastor.

### The Privilege of Innocence.

But a blow falls. He is in his chapel one day, while Gertrude, who has been taught

to play, is improvising on the organ. The pastor's eldest son, Jacques, enters without seeing his father, who watches the expression on Gertrude's face as she welcomes one who, evidently, addresses her as a lover. The pastor steals out, stunned but unobserved, his whole aspect of life changed by this revelation. The reader must follow for himself the extremely moving and ingenious scenes which now depict the struggle of the father to retain his false position, the mute but determined resistance of the mother, the piety of the son, and the purity and unconsciousness of the innocent blind enthusiast, moving in her radiant darkness among these tormented souls.

At length the surgeons decide that Gertrude's eyes may be safely operated on, and this is performed with entire physical success; but with her blindness she loses her joy, her serenity, and her unconsciousness of evil, so that the pang of discovery is too sharp for her to endure. She dies, and Jacques, abjuring the Protestant tradition, enters the Church of Rome and takes vows of celibacy. For them all, for the heart-broken pastor himself most of all, the whole episode is a commentary on the divine words: "If ye were blind ye would not have sin!" In her cecity Gertrude knew no law, and lived. But when her world was invaded by light the commandments asserted themselves, and she could not do otherwise than die.