

A French Masterpiece

ANDRÉ GIDE is the towering figure in contemporary French literature. Although his books have been appearing at frequent intervals since 1891 — books which have had a tremendous influence over most of the younger writers on the Continent — Gide makes the rather startling confession that *THE COUNTERFEITERS*, the most recent of his works of fiction to be published here and abroad, is his first novel.

“To purge the novel of all those elements which do not belong specifically to the novel,” is the author’s goal in *The Counterfeiters*. He attains it superbly. The book is indisputably a masterpiece. In this day of novels which are not novels Gide goes back in structure to Thackeray, Dickens, Flaubert, even though he makes innovations and reaches far ahead of the present day.

It is practically impossible to outline the plot within a small space. It is evident that the events of the story were not pigeonholed and meticulously arranged in advance. The story grew of its own will, moved by an inner necessity to its conclusion without the usual machinery of stilted climax and of preconceived solution.

Gide must have begun, it seems to me, with certain characters in mind, and after noting carefully their qualities and inclinations, he started to write. Each person in the novel — and there are a great many of them — has his destiny interwoven in some way with that of the others.

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The novel moves along from day to day in the lives of these characters as life itself would do. There is no straining for the unusual in phrase or incident. Consequently, although he has not consciously attempted to write realism, Gide achieves in these lives a realism which shames the work of the self-acknowledged “realists” by its naturalness and tranquility. Bernard, Olivier, Edouard, Laura, Lillian — it has truly been a long while since figures so human lived in the pages of a book.

That is André Gide’s secret — his ability to portray human nature as it really is. In other words, Gide is the “inner bur. an.” He is not concerned with fixed points, but interprets always the baffling urge of quest which drives every soul onward, endlessly seeking the endless.

Gide’s is a powerful mind, possibly disastrous to those not sturdy enough to withstand it. In him the two major movements of French literature become fused: rather than be dominated by either, he commands both.

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