

The Counterfeiters

The Counterfeiters, translated from the French of André Gide by Dorothy Bussy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$3.

MY review of "The Counterfeiters," if ever I have to write one, will consist of a certain number of paragraphs, each as true as I can make it, but they won't compose into a likeness. By putting the emphasis in the wrong places, the review will distort the book. I shall fail to define the parts played in my total impression by M. Gide's extraordinary continuous readability and by his unobtrusive decency; or to explain why his tact, which is never furtive, which you couldn't even call too guarded, is yet, to my taste, a shade too obliging, always ready to give me first aid. I shan't succeed in getting the proportions right. Either M. Gide's noteworthiness as an artist or his restraint as a propagandist will be out of scale, no matter how hard I try to relate them to each other. Besides, though I'm willing—at least I hope I'm not unwilling—to learn a little of the tolerance he wishes to propagate, I neither like his way of teaching tolerance nor am able to think of another way which I might like. That's not a defensible position, obviously. Another case of wrong emphasis. Perhaps a good review of "The Counterfeiters" wouldn't put any emphasis anywhere.

I don't say all this to myself out of routine modesty. It is possible both to fancy oneself as a reviewer and also to own oneself floored by "The Counterfeiters." I can't at the moment think of anybody who will respond appropriately to all the stimuli he will find here. Such an all-round responder will have to share Mr. Percy Lubbock's interest in the craft of fiction; and Judge Ben. Lindsey's interest in the temptations which lie in wait for boys between fourteen and twenty, particularly city-bred boys. He will enjoy meeting, even in a novel, the discursive mind. He will like to stop and think, for example, about "that deliberate avoidance of life which gave style to the works of the Greek dramatists . . . or to the tragedies of the French XVIIth century. Is there anything more perfectly and deeply human than these works? But that's just it—they are human only in their depths; they don't pride themselves on appearing so—or, at any rate, on appearing real. They remain works of art." And, by the time he had finished "The Counterfeiters," its quite perfect reader would have changed his mind about homosexuality. He would have passed from a state of lesser to a state of greater open-mindedness, and he would prefer his last state to his first.

No, it would be useless for me to try and make a noise like this many-sided reader. But somewhere or other in my review, by way of compensating, by way of revealing more sides than I have, I might let out the fact that this is not my first acquaintance with M. Gide. Let it out casually, if possible, perhaps by quoting what the author of "Paludes" (the "Paludes" that never gets written) says of himself to Angèle: "*Ahl je voulais encore, délicat amie, vous faire remarquer combien j'ai la plaisanterie sérieuse.*" Perhaps M. Gide kept one eye on "Paludes" while he was writing "The Counterfeiters." Or half an eye. In method the two books are a little alike on top. To pull with bored hands, and ever so accurately, all our legs all the time—that was the point of "Paludes," which seemed to be going somewhere and did not arrive anywhere. No wonder M. Gide calls it a "*sottie.*" In "The

Counterfeiters," a method ostensibly as aimless results in a novel which progresses, without appearing to care where it strays, by one carefully sinuous winding after another—"I choose not to foresee its windings," M. Gide says, and seems not to foresee them—progresses with perfect assurance, and an air of lacking assurance, steadily toward the place he had in view from the first. A go-as-you-please chronicle, which exists in order to record pretty much everything that happens in the course of a few months to three or four related households in Paris—that is what "The Counterfeiters" looks like. In reality every episode is hand-picked. M. Gide knows what he is about. He is making a plight-of-youth context for the one episode he intends us to compare and contrast with that context. He does it well. An artist ought to make his different materials severely one, if possible. M. Gide does the impossible. He makes his track and his red herrings severely one.

I have forgotten, or else I never knew, the name of the French novelist who said of fiction, "*C'est un art trop difficile.*" M. Gide's art of fiction, as we see it in "The Counterfeiters," must have been extra difficult. At first sight he seems to be multiplying his difficulties out of pure philoprogenitiveness. The central figure in "The Counterfeiters" is a novelist, Edouard, who is writing a novel called "The Counterfeiters," and who has invented, as his central figure, a novelist who is writing a novel. . . . No, M. Gide does not continue, he pulls up just there, having suggested to us an endless series of novels, each of them called "The Counterfeiters" and each including among its characters a novelist at work on a novel called "The Counterfeiters." Thus M. Gide invites our minds to travel, remove by remove, as far away as they please from the real world, and on their way back to stop at the world he shows us in his "Counterfeiters," and to accept it as real. Such is one of the traps he sets for our credence. He sets others, each as carefully exposed as this one, as unavoidable, as sure-fire. Edouard, talking to some friends at Saas-Fée, says of his "Counterfeiters": "For more than a year now I have been working at it, nothing happens to me that I don't put into it—everything I see, everything I know, everything that other people's lives and my own teach me. . . . What I want is to express reality on the one hand, and on the other that effort to stylize it into art of which I have just been speaking. . . . And the subject of the book, if you must have one, is just that struggle between what reality offers him [i. e., novelist No. 3, the one Edouard has invented] and what he desires to make of it." Again M. Gide wins his bet. Our attention is fastened on this struggle, which never begins, and on this contrast, suggested often and nowhere exhibited, between life and art, between raw material and finished product, and thus we are all the readier to accept as raw material, as reality not yet touched by the novelist, the persons and events in M. Gide's novel.

Edouard is always studying one or another of the difficulties which perplex a novelist, always leaving it from his own standpoint unresolved, and whenever he does so he resolves one of M. Gide's difficulties, he overcomes or slips round or removes an obstacle to credibility. In M. Gide's hands, this method works with such precision that nearly all his novel is as credible as Defoe. I believe whatever he tells me, and whatever Edouard tells me—about a third of "The Counterfeiters" is Edouard's journal. I accept the exceptional, the police-court-itemish part of M. Gide's material, as trustfully as the part which records what might happen to any boy somewhere between fourteen and twenty.