

A LETTER FROM ABROAD

by Rebecca West

When England became pagan—André Gide and Anne Douglas Sedgwick—André Gide and Robert Hichens—André Gide and Dostoievski—The fantasy and symbolism of an early novel—Wherein lies Gide's power—Terrible children in Gide and Cocteau—Will "The Innocent Voyage" become a classic?—The prevalence of books in France.

London, October.

I HAVE crawled about on all fours ever since I visited the Cathedral of Aix-en-Provence and the *gardienne*—a magnificent old lady, with the proud face and stiff officious bearing of a Pope, and a straight back rising from her immense haunches like a wheat-sheaf from a field—pointed her several pounds of keys at the tapestries in the choir and announced: "These hung for several hundred years in St. Paul's Cathedral in London". (They didn't. They had come from Canterbury before Wren was born.) "*But, of course, when England became pagan, they were sold, along with all the other sacred things.*" What a picture of impious ruin! She was so much surer about it than I have ever been about anything that I was at a hopeless disadvantage. Also, no one could watch her thick white eyebrows meeting in disapprobation as she spoke without believing that all the Nordics were heathen and damned. Was that a moment to get up and say that there was one writer considered great in France who I could not believe could have gained half his reputation if he had written in England or in America?

Yet I could no longer hold back my enraged conviction that if we admire André Gide we are simply having something put

over on us. In Aix-en-Provence I had bought Gide's latest book, *l'Ecole des femmes*, (which Knopf has brought out in translated form on your side) and I read it in bed at Arles, cursing freely because I could see no difference between it and one of the less happy productions of Anne Douglas Sedgwick. There is the same mechanical dodge of showing the reader an intolerable character, and then letting another character pass from deluded admiration of it to complete realization of its true nature. These characters are throughout completely static; they collect information about each other and adjust their opinions in consequence, but they do not themselves alter. There is the same difference between this and a real novel in which characters live and develop as there is between straw and grass; but although straw can be put to some good use (though I cannot for the life of me remember what) this dry and unnecessary exposition of ideas that were already established in the mind of both author and reader before the book was begun can serve no purpose. All it can do is to encourage smugness on the part of the reader, who at the end can say, "Ah, I saw through him all the time!" It is done with the most complete incapacity for suggesting either the sensuous appearances of this earth, or anything

like the feeling that the psychic drama sets up inside people's heads. There is nothing in these pages except the drabest, "he-said-and-she-said" recitation of the facts (not the essence) of the theme.

Am I showing myself a tasteless ignoramus that cannot appreciate austerity and subtlety? I am not. I know my *Adolphe* and I perceive that in that masterpiece Constant puts in all that Gide leaves out. It is simple in its style, but complex enough in its perceptions.

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"We will leave that book behind," I said in the morning to my companion, as we were packing; "it isn't nearly as good as the rest of Gide . . ." and immediately I had that hollow feeling in the mouth which comes when one suspects oneself of talking nonsense. For this, I realized, was not the first time I had used those words. I had, in fact, said them so often before and in such circumstances that they certainly must be nonsense; for my lips have formed them every time I have set down a book by Gide. What did I mean by this inferentially admirable "rest of Gide"? Because I couldn't help feeling that I did mean something. During the next few days, all over France, I tried to find out. I leaped from the automobile at Nîmes and bought *l'Immoraliste*, which I re-read that night in a tiny village under the steep chestnut forests of the Cévennes mountains; and in the morning, as I walked up the narrow main street, I wondered if the invention of printing had not been in some ways a mistake. For though this place can never have been anything but a huddling together of poor folks and a halt for benighted travelers, yet something seen through the archway claimed the eye as imperatively and deliciously as if it had been the jet of a fountain playing in the sunlight; and there was nothing radiant there, only an exquisite spiral staircase rising from the courtyard of a perfect early sixteenth-century house.

Man, I do believe, had a more natural turn

for stone than for letters. The architects and masons who built that house cannot have been working in very favorable conditions but they had made a masterpiece. Gide, with a mind adapted to getting the best out of print, and finding the phrase that looks well in print, was in touch with all the significant print of his time; he had got caught in a cross-draught between the open doors of Dostoevski and Oscar Wilde, and in consequence he had produced in *l'Immoraliste* something uncommonly like the earlier works of Robert Hichens. This fee-faw-fum hokum about the man who takes his wife down to the desert though he knows it will kill her because of his appetite for stranger-than-matrimonial pleasures is nothing like as poignant a study in the incapacity of the neurotic to feel love as Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

The next day, in Le Puy, I bought *les Caves du Vatican*, and I found it, in spite of a magnificent opening, a tame re-hash of Dostoevski. The idea of the fraud that is got up to cheat simple souls into giving up their all, by a story that the Pope was being kept a prisoner in the cellars of the Vatican and had to be ransomed, is an attempt to fake, out of the possibilities of French life, something like the religious preoccupations and superstitions of Russian folk; and in the murder the intellectual, Lafcadio Wlinski, commits on Amedée Fleurissoire, a simple soul on his way to Rome to pay the ransom, whom he throws out of a railway carriage for no earthly reason but that he would rather like to commit a murder, is a straight steal from *Crime and Punishment* and *The Possessed*. But when I bought Gide's essays on Dostoevski twenty-four hours later, at Clermont-Ferrand, I found them full not of criticism but of mimetic frenzies. He continually writes as if Blake, when he urges mankind to give itself up to the power of the demon (by which he meant nothing more than the impulsive force in the soul which cannot render an exact account of itself to the reason), is say-

ing the same thing as Dostoevski, when he declares that man must go down into the depths of sin and disintegration if he is to reach the heights of holiness and wholeness through repentance. "This," as Leviticus keeps on saying testily, "is confusion."

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But in Nevers I bought *Isabelle*, a novel that Gide wrote nearly twenty years ago, and I got a sense of his extreme power. It is a novel that bears no relation whatsoever to reality. I am not complaining simply that it is not realistic, for I have a tender spot for fantasy. But to be tolerable, fantasy, even more than a realistic novel, must have a solid basis in reality, as witness the extraordinarily dreamy tales of Hoffmann and his school; and this is the projection of an infantile fantasy, such as occupies the mind before sound observations of reality can be made, though it is set down with the craftsmanship of an inspired adult.

It is a tale told by a middle-aged man who, on a country walk with two friends, comes across the ruins of a château, and tells them of the experiences he had within its walls as a young scholar, when it was still the seat of an old family, and he had gone there to work on a rare manuscript in the library. The place was splendid, but there was a mysterious sense of tragedy and decay about it. The family consisted of an old Marquis and his wife, who were charming people, and a cousin of theirs and his wife, who are ridiculous and mentally defective; they are suspiciously like personifications of the two aspects, the reverent and the derisive, in which the child views the parents. There is also the Marquis's grandchild, a little crippled boy who had to hobble about in irons. This child's parents were never mentioned directly, but the young scholar discovered a miniature of an exquisitely beautiful girl named Isabelle, who proved to be the Marquis's daughter, and the mother of the boy. An old letter which he found hidden in a

summer-house, and a gossiping Abbé, revealed to him that the girl was on the point of eloping with a young nobleman of the district when he was killed. This romantic story, and the beauty of the portrait, set the young scholar in a kind of brooding infatuation for her, and he hung about waiting for her to pay one of her nocturnal visits, which he knew the family unwillingly received from time to time. At last she came, and he spied on her as she begged her parents for money. Her implorations had a tawdry quality; she was in some indefinable way foul; he understood why the voices of those of the household whom he has persuaded to talk of Isabelle have been heavy with hate, as if they could have accused her of other things as well as crippling her child before its birth by the means she took to hide her pregnancy. (This, by the way, is a common accusation made by the neurotic against the mother. Byron repeatedly asserted that his lameness was due to his mother's "false delicacy before his birth", although actually he suffered from Little's disease, an affection of the Achilles tendon which has nothing to do with pre-natal conditions, and there is not the smallest reason to suspect poor rantipole Mrs. Byron of either true or false delicacy.)

Disillusioned, the young scholar went away, and came back after a lapse of time to find that the grandparents were dead and that Isabelle had come into the property. He found her sitting in the park, sewing a new ribbon on a battered old hat (here the laughter of those acquainted with the Freudian theory of symbols becomes almost too knowing) while she supervised the workmen who are ruining the estate by cutting down all the magnificent trees (here the laughter of those accustomed to the Freudian theory of symbols becomes deafening). He engaged her in conversation about the past, and she betrayed that she was responsible for her lover's death. Just before her elopement she took fright and told an old servant, who was compelled by his duty to protect the family

honor, to lie in wait for the young man and kill him. Sickened, the young scholar turned his back on her and left her, and, by buying a farm where the crippled boy can live with the old servant, to whom apparently there attaches no blame, he redeemed the wrong she had done.

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This is a poor novel, since it consists largely of unsubstantiated allegations about its characters unsupported by any artistic evidence. But it is a superb expression of a fantasy, such as inspired countless myths in folklore and religion, in which all the evil is attributed to the woman as mother and wife. The château (which is life) would be a place of beauty and virtue were it not for Isabelle (who is a personification of the sexual aspect of woman). She has crippled her child: that is, she has inflicted on him the pain and humiliation of birth. She does it as a result of her efforts to appear the virgin she is not; an incident which expresses the resentment the child feels when it realizes that its mother, whom it has always revered, must have had sexual relations with its father. By her portrait, that is by the romantic simulacrum of herself in which she can make the man believe when she has aroused his sexual passions, she entraps the young scholar; but when she comes to him in reality, she proves to be greedy, she makes demands for money: that is, for strength, for virility.

The passage in which the young scholar spies on her interview as she asks for money curiously resembles folk-tales and dreams which on examination prove to depict a child's emotion on realizing that his parents are sexual beings. Isabelle is so murderous that she kills her lover. She does worse than that: she makes an innocent male, in the person of the old servant, involve himself in the crime; and in that we can see the son's remorse that desire for the mother's attentions should have made him jealous of his father and his instinct to shift the blame on-

to the woman. The hat is one of the commonest symbols for a woman's sex; and the picture of Isabelle tricking out the old battered thing with a fresh gawd is inspired by hatred for the non-virgin woman. The tall tree is one of the commonest symbols for a man's sex; and that Isabelle is having them cut down is expression of the world-wide fear that sexual intercourse is dangerous to men. The young scholar saves his life by turning his back on Isabelle and is represented as then becoming rich, and being able to buy safety for the males whom she had ruined.

Not only does the story provide analogy after analogy with folk-lore and religious myth, it has the characteristic feeling of fantasy. It gives none of the exhilarating feeling of creative art; it is not an analysis of an experience and a synthesis of the findings into an excitatory complex. It is a soothing repetition of a fantasy with which we are already acquainted, it recalls us to an earlier, and less exacting, stage of our existence, just as a nursery lullaby takes us back to the time when we slept in a cot. Hence its quality of exquisite softness, its lovely feeling of familiarity and inevitability, which is the distinctive glory of this book and *la Symphonie pastorale*, another restatement of an easily identifiable fantasy.

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There, I believe, is the secret of Gide's greatness. I still refuse to credit that he is a great novelist. I am convinced that he wrote *The Counterfeiters* not because he was experimenting with a new form but through sheer uncertainty; and that he makes his characters do the many odd things in it which are never completely explained not because he is giving a new symbolic account of human behavior, but because Dostoevski made his characters behave like that (though he always explains why) and Gide was casting round for any device he could find to help get his story home. The curious journal he published, giving his preliminary notes for *The*

Counterfeiters, shows him as moved by the most adventitious forces in deciding the structure of his book. The greatness of Gide lies in his power to look within his own mind and honestly describe the fantasies that lurk at the bottom of it, the fantasies about life which he conceived as a child and which have determined the whole course of his mental life. This is not the highest greatness. The real giants of the earth record in their work their attempts to test out the veraciousness of these fantasies: they turn their attention to those parts of experience which their fantasies tell them are important, and try to reestimate their importance in the light of the intellect. But in faithfully recording the fantasies themselves Gide places himself high above the dwarfs of the earth, who perniciously pretend that they have tested out their fantasies when they have not, and put out rationalized restatements of them that add nothing to human wisdom. He deserves eminence for being honest in that department of life where it is most difficult to achieve honesty, since it is the nature of man to be desperately shy of confessing his naïve imaginings about life. Furthermore, he has a special value in that he is absolutely contemporary. His readers would in any case regard him with a peculiar protective affection, because the fantasies he reveals are those which belong to the childhood of men and of the race, but they also feel for him a fervent loyalty such as soldiers feel for a general who leads them in some cause dear to all. His fantasies are their own. Anyone who attacks them is injuring the readers as well as the author. I can think of no writer in England or America who has such a devoted public as Gide.

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That the content of Gide's mind is the content of the mind of a huge and important part of France is proved by consideration of a certain recent phase of his development. Anyone who holds a fantasy such as that

which inspires *Isabelle* is loyally bound to come to the conclusion that since woman is so pernicious man would be well-advised not to love her; and to travel further to the conclusion that if man has a need to love and be loved he had better find a lover among his own sex. From recognizing this conclusion André Gide did not shrink; and in *Corydon*, which was at first privately printed and then publicly issued in 1924, he makes the admission that for many persons homosexuality must be the easy and obvious course. Now, persons of old-fashioned views might regard this as a very shocking admission, which must bring Europe to the same state of ruin as Rome and Athens; and persons of other views might regard this as the beginning of the Golden Age when, all being free to do as they may, there shall be no more conflicts, and harmony shall reign over all. But the next manifestations of his talents suggest a consequence that, I think, could have been foreseen by none.

About the same time that he made this admission an interest in naughty little boys which had been spasmodically visible in his work (notably in *l'Immoraliste*) flowered into an intense preoccupation with crimes committed by children. This came to colossal expression in *The Counterfeiters*, where the young are represented as lecherous, lying, thieving, murderous little monsters; and that this was not a passing phase is shown by the fascinated attention he turns on crimes committed by lads in his commentary in *la nouvelle revue française*. This is seen at once to be merely a new stage in his logical development, if we go back to the *Isabelle* fantasy and examine it again. Supposing that the hatred between man and woman that lies behind it is not an ultimate thing, but is an expression of something more abstract? It is not the woman who is the fixed object of the man's hatred; that external rôle is played by whatever gives him pleasure. The sense of guilt which plays such an important and such an insane part in his psychic life makes him

turn against anything which extends his being by affording his joy. If it be a woman who does this for him, he will regard her as a criminal, and will accuse her; and if it be a youth who does it, he will treat him in exactly the same way. In other words, men are now going to bring the same charges against youths that they have always brought against women. They are going to allege that they are untrustworthy, dishonest, cold, cruel, and, above all, dangerous, and to dwell on all evidence which supports this thesis. These accusations will be made against children of both sexes, to cover the whole ground of homosexuality. Alas, the new tolerance seems likely to do but little to reduce the disharmony of life. For the fundamental ungraciousness, whereby those who ought to show kindness to each other in view of favors received spend themselves in the devising of cruelties, still stands, though the persons involved are differently grouped.

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In this phase of Gide's development his contemporary quality is manifest. For another author who possesses it to a marked degree, Jean Cocteau, has just published a novel which is full of this fascinated and repelled contemplation of children. A reader who picks up *les Enfants terribles*, without regarding it as a reaction to the moral adjustments of the time, will find the treatment oddly intense for such a trivial subject. When one has read over a hundred and twenty pages and found nothing but an excited transcription of the insults exchanged by a schoolboy and his sister in the intervals of indulging in various adolescent habits, one becomes puzzled unless one remembers that the author is describing those whom the world (in so far as it has made the new acceptance) sees as the source of all pleasure and all sin, even as the early Fathers saw women.

This attitude towards criminal children which is common to Gide and Cocteau, and

is discernible in many writers under their influence, cannot be traced to any other than this psychological cause. The obvious alternative explanation, that there is an increase in the number of crimes committed by the young in France which would challenge a novelist's attention, like any other startling social change, is lacking. There is an increase, but it is a trifling one; and on my return I found that, although the delinquent child is a rare and not enterprising figure in English life, a conspicuous example—for it is far nearer being the work of genius than either *The Counterfeiters* or *les Enfants terribles*—was the best-seller of the day in London.

I have commented in these columns on the dreary preference of some of the most influential English critics for novels that resembled tepid cups of sweet tea. I have now to record the astounding fact that these have reviewed Mr. Richard Hughes's *High Wind in Jamaica*, published in the United States under the title of *The Innocent Voyage*, exactly as if it were their favorite tepid cup of sweetened tea, instead of being the hot draught of mad, primal fantasy and poetry that it is. It actually owes much of its popularity to the efforts of a critic who has headed the opposition to Proust on the ground of his interest in the perverse and unpleasant. Yet in this account of the children who are captured by pirates and appal their captors by their cold-blooded villainy, the book looks down into the core of the embroilment of which poor Proust did but explore the periphery. It is certain that Mr. Hughes was not conscious of what he was doing, for if he had been he could hardly have done it. He had probably taken but little notice of the world's changing attitude to morality, in his Shelleyan innocence and preoccupation with ethereal matters. (It was of Mr. Hughes that a certain country servant said to her mistress, "A gentleman called when you were out, ma'am, but I didn't know if I ought to let him in, he looked so like Our Lord".) But, all the more candidly for that, he has been

able to look into the human heart and describe the fantasies for and ungendered by the new situation.

The children on the pirate ship are given the power and magic of the desired; they are also given the guilt. It is not true that a little girl of ten would be likely to murder a man for such frivolous reasons as made Emily murder the Dutch captain; any more than it is likely that Isabelle would have contrived the murder of her lover, particularly at a moment when it involved her in the blackest tragedy. But pleasure is murderous: if those who give pleasure are to be justly described they must be shown murdering. Those who receive pleasure, on the other hand, are innocent victims; the pirates are represented as gentle and industrious souls whose choice of their career is inexplicable. And there is a gulf between them that is bridged by no community of substance. The children in the book are regarded as if they did not belong to the same species as grown-ups; just as, in the past, a great many imaginative works represented men and women as being two wholly different kinds of animal. And out of the pages Emily looks with just the same maddening claim on love and worship, the same repulsive indifference, as we may see on the stony faces of goddesses in which primitive man has recorded his emotions regarding the part that women play in his universe.

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It is a book whose value it is impossible to estimate as yet, while the shock of its novelty still shakes us. I think it will rank among the great phantasmagorias of literature, somewhere below *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*, but nearer to them in its power to bring up glittering beasts out of the strange seas where we sail, illuminating

the snakes that coil their iridescence in human breasts. The trouble is that when the time for that estimation comes along the book may have foundered beneath the flood of current fiction, a fate which overtakes good work in England and America more easily than it ought to because of the imperfections of our bookselling system.

I have said that I bought these books by Gide in Aix-en-Provence, in Nîmes, in Le Puy, in Clermont-Ferrand, and in Nevers; and I mean that I stopped the automobile at the first bookseller I saw in these towns (which was always one of several) and was able to find a representative collection of Gide's early and recent books, from which I was able to make my pick. Now, could I have stopped an automobile at the first bookseller I saw in, let us say, Charleston, or in Atlanta, or in Nashville, or in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, or in Troy, and found a representative collection of the early and recent works of George Moore? I know that I could not in the equivalent towns in England. There are in France two factors which make it possible for a bookseller to carry a large stock, both of which seem at first sight to carry a hardship that outweighs their advantages. One is that books are so cheap that it is hard to imagine how authors make a living; and another is that the French public reads books rather than magazines, which is in a certain sense a loss; for that makes it ill-informed about matters with which English and American writers acquaint themselves through magazine articles. But these disadvantages are as nothing compared to the awareness of literature that this diffusion of books brings to the people, and the appreciation of it; and the confidence that as a natural sequel shows itself in the writings of French authors, giving them that serene audacity which is their special quality.

CHRISTMAS BOOKS FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

by May Lamberton Becker

ONE whose present duty it is to report upon new books for growing boys and girls must push past those for little children, charm they never so wisely. Not for him the admirable product of the United States, nor the results of international competition that this year enrich the American nursery with the crowding richness of color that illustrates the *Magic Flutes* of Josef Kozisek, the Czech (Longmans, Green, \$3.50), the Hungarian scarlets of the Peter-shams's *Miki* (Doubleday, Doran, \$2.00), the seasoned wisdom of Luigi Capuana's *Italian Tales* (Dutton, \$2.50), the triumph of modern book-making manifest in Blaise Cendrars's *Little Black Stories for Little White Children* (Payson & Clarke, \$2.00), taken over from the French, or the enchanting English offering, William Nicholson's *The Pirate Twins* (Coward-McCann, \$1.50). These he must forego if he is to get space enough even to attempt a survey of some of the books from across the line that divides childhood from the next stage in human development. Fortunately, for me, children's books have been already presented to the readers in the November BOOKMAN by Helen Ferris, one of their most enlightened and sympathetic critics; it remains to take up the tale where that report left off.

If books for little children generally appeal more keenly to the reviewer than those for the next older age, it may be because a man usually writes a child's book to please him-

self and a book for youth is often written to please an audience, and one of whose likes and dislikes the writer is sometimes in fear and often in doubt. "I must continually stop to ask myself," a writer of boys' books once told me, "How would a boy between twelve and sixteen feel about this?" More than one book for this age suggests between the lines that the author has thus constantly pulled himself up. It is, to be sure, an improvement that the author now cares what this age thinks and feels, and believes it worth taking into consideration; there was a time when he was comfortably sure that he knew what they ought to feel and think, and all he had to do was to tell them. In writing for young people it is better, of course, to be cautious than to be cautionary, but neither is good for literature, whose production demands, one must admit, a certain soul-foremost recklessness.

One might say that the ideal writer for youth would be one who need not ask himself how a boy felt, because he just naturally knew. A good many writers do just naturally know about little children: Lewis Carroll in the *Alice* books, Sophie May in the *Dottie Dimple* series, Evelyn Scott in *Witch Perkins*, A. A. Milne in *The House at Pooh Corner*. A list like that could begin pretty far back and go on for a long time, but there are not many writers who can unfold the mind of youth with the triumphant certainty of Booth Tarkington, and even fewer who find what they see there, as he does, not only amusing