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André Gide Journeys to the Congo

In the Travel Dairy of the French Novelist the Spell of the Dark Continent Is Admirably Reflected

TRAVELS IN THE CONGO. By Andre Gide. Translated from the French by Dorothy Bussy. 374 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. $5.

ALTHOUGH we are on the threshold of the period when Americans by the tens of thousands will start on jaunts oversea and into strange lands, it is safe to say that not even the hardiest tourist of them all will select the Belgian and the French Congo for his Summer pilgrimage. Not by the widest stretch of the imagination is it possible for the average man to think of himself as embarking on such an expedition. Tropical Africa, wild beasts and at best half-wild blacks, poisonous reptiles, sickness-breeding flies—the picture is one so repellent in its details that the thought of the vast majestic beauty of the jungle, the romance of the idea of setting foot where few white feet have trod, are not sufficiently powerful to lure the curious. Even the most devoted Conradian, although he may read over and over again "The Heart of Darkness," does not find himself tempted to follow the Conrad trail. Clearly, one must be very young be tempted by the Congo.

Conrad was but 12 and wholly unaware of the import of his notion when he put his finger on the map of Africa and said. "I will go there!" He was not much more than twice 12 when he put his plan into execution. And André Gide was but 20 when he resolved on landing at the Congo's mouth, on making a circuit inland and on returning to the coast across the Cameroon. The narrative of this journey, translated from the author's French by Dorothy Bussy, is sharp in its observation, panoramic in its entirety and indelible in its concise recording. M. Gide, whose novel "The Counterfeiters" has not escaped memory, is among the distinguished stylists of post-war France. "Travels in the Congo" should increase his American audience.

André Gide dedicates his African work to Joseph Conrad; but we fancy the latter would smile, perhaps somewhat cynically, at the ease in which the Frenchman made the trip. It was an expedition de luxe, using automobiles when possible and trekking with half a hundred porters over the trails. But at first they are ascending the Congo river.

> We are coasting along the Belgian shore [writes Gide]. The French shore in the distance is almost out of sight. There are enormous flat reaches which my eyes search in vain for the hippopotamuses. Every now and then the vegetation on the banks grows thicker; shrubs and trees take the place of reeds; but whether it be shrubs or weeds, the vegetation is continually encroaching on the river. * * *
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> A pleasant shade of mango trees, a few huts and an indolent population in front of them. Some marvelous butterflies. The air blows so light, so suave, so voluptuously soft, that one seems to be breathing deliciousness.

The voluptuousness of tropical Africa is a note that recurs again and again, alternating with the note of cruelty, the cruelty of European in his contact with the natives, the cruelty of native toward native. Life is cheap in the Congo; nature taught the blacks that truth eons ago, and they have followed nature's teaching thoroughly. The white man, when he came, was not only an apt pupil, but in many ways he improved on the fiendishness of the black. Altogether, it has been a sorry picture. André Gide, it should be said, however, does not push this aspect into the foreground. The commission that inquired into the atrocities of some decades back covered that phase once and for all. And conditions, one gathers from Gide's pages, are vastly better today than in the past. The Frenchman, however, makes one sage remark: "Only tried and trusted officials should be sent to out-of-the-way stations in the wilds. Until a young man has proved his worth he should be watched and guided."

That the difficulty whites have in dealing with natives is due in no small degree to the deficiencies of native languages, M. Gide makes clear. Following the report of the trial of the chieftain in which no very profitable result was achieved, except for the black's removal and the setting up in his stead of another probably no more competent, the writer explains that Africans cannot understand the word "why"; that when asked for the cause, or reason, of an act they took the question to mean, in what manner was the act performed. "Their brains," writes Gide, "seem incapable of forming a connection between cause and effect."

Apparently the African tribes

A Masked Dancer of the Belgian Congo.

differ quite as markedly from one another as the various tribes of American Indians have been reported to differ; with one the huts would be squalid and ill-shaped, with another, if not exactly clean, they would at least, possess symmetry; the members of one tribe would be cheerful and helpful, those of another treacherous and ill-tempered; one people would show no little intelligence, others would be hopelessly stupid. Dancing was found to be the principal diversion of the native, especially on the part of the women, who "danced at the entrance of every village." This dancing, one gathers, is something wholly spontaneous and not to be confounded with the tribal dances for the exorcising of demons and the restoring of the sick. Parenthetically, it may be remarked that André Gide takes issue with writers who [illegible] that

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the dancing of the African natives is primarily indulged in as a stimulus to erotic orgies. He found for the most part that the dancing, although often carried to the point of exhaustion, was instigated by nothing more profound than mere childish delight in rhythm.

On the way back to the coast through the Cameroons the party came upon the villages of the Massas blacks, whose huts have been the subject of comment from all travelers who have seen them. But whereas most have remarked on their "strangeness," André Gide found himself impressed with their beauty, a beauty all the more remarkable because unaccountable.

> The Massas' hut [he writes] resembles no other; but it is not only strange, it is beautiful. A beauty so perfect, so accomplished, that it seems natural. No ornament, no superfluity. The pure curve of its line, which is uninterrupted from base to summit, seems to have been arrived at mathematically by an ineluctable necessity. This hut is made by hand, like a vase. It is the work, not of a mason, but a potter.

An amusing addendum to this is that the huts are also occupied by the cattle belonging to the family as well as by the humans and that the doorway is made larger at the middle height so as to admit the bulging body of the cow!

In certain aspect, "Travels in the Congo" is more Gallic in comment than a similar work by an American or an Englishman would have been. Viewed with understanding, this frankness is an added reason for reading the volume, and, of course, the authority of the work is thereby enhanced. Of the fascination the book holds for all who enjoy reading of the strange and sinister portions of the earth enough has been indicated. Distinguished in manner, without any imported romanticism, but reflecting the spell of the Dark Continent, vivid, although that is not the right word, for André Gide enables the reader not only to see, but also to hear and to smell Africa, "Travels in the Congo" is a book to place beside one's set of Conrad.