The Negro Free and Bound

By Susan Wilbur.

Black Magic, by Paul Morand. Translated from the French by Hamish Miles. Illustrated by Aaron Douglas. (The Viking Press.) $3.

Travels in the Congo, by Andre Gide. Translated from the French by Dorothy Bussy. (Alfred A. Knopf.)

Here in America, of course, the negro is our new subject. He is new if you write of him in his black aspect, hitting it up in Harlem or Marseilles or the Indies. He is newer still if you write of him in his white aspect, attempting as he does in a whole handful of the spring novels, to pass as a white person, or, where the skin is not conducive to this attempt, as in Mamba, trying at least to live according to the white tradition, sing spirituals from scores and applaud portrait painters who do likenesses that are Caucasian in type albeit dusky.

The French writers, Paul Morand and Andre Gide, are, however, concerned with the negro in less frivolous attitudes. M. Gide sees in him again what Herriet Beecher Stowe saw, a human being hopelessly oppressed because lacking political status. The Congo being, it would appear, ripe for another housecleaning. While M. Morand sees in him something exotic, something darkly exciting.

Sophie Taylor, the negro dancer, may take the mansion of the Dukes of Re, fill it with antiques, invite half Paris, but if when the party is at its height, she chances to notice a small black hand peeping out from under her pillow, a scream and she's off to the Voodoo doctor, to ceremonies underground, the dark excitements of black magic. Dr. Lincoln Vamp may have made money enough to build a skyscraper devoted floor by floor to the interests of his race, his name may be, as a fellow member of the pan-African congress in Brussels remarked "synonymous with scientific exactitude and precision," but let him loose in the negro museum of the palace of Tervuemen and racial memories will creep into his veins and throb there, making of him a black sorcerer in a Congo village walking thru heaped-up anthills of foreskins. Occide may be merely one of 2,000 barristers at Porte au Prince in Haiti, and not one of the most successful, a mulatto who would probably go to Paris if he could manage it. But under his light exterior those same dark streams are flowing. He has it in him to blow up embassies, to practice blood-curdling rites on remote hilltops. The head severing one among them, "And then—with what eyes?—he saw the executioner, still holding his stemless trophy by the ears, come forward and set it, like a knight's helm, on his shoulders." Pamela Freedman may be white, may have inherited millions, may have started like anyone else on a sightseeing cruise to Africa. But let her miss her boat and one drop of dark blood behind her white skin and her green eyes will assert itself, and letting boat after boat go without her she will end as the wife of a young chief whose village is deep in the forest, one wife among several. Which brings one to Africa and the still darker mysteries of black blood undiluted. The rite of eating dead kings. The fetish-tree giving its commands in a strident voice to an assemblage which stands blue and red in the firelight as if awaiting a benediction.

"Black Magic" is the result of travels in America and Africa, of observations in Paris; and its sinister effectiveness is largely gained thru the way in which it utilizes observed detail to build up both atmosphere and climax. "The forest grew denser still; it was now becoming a tunnel, a sewer; water was welling up unseen, penetrating everywhere. The raised footpath switchbacked along a wavy causeway, as at Coney Island. The tangle of roots, the profusion of twisting lianes, the straddling of parasites, seemed all inextricable. Everything was green; not a single joining item, yellow or white, not one smooth surface to rest once eyes upon, not a thing that was not twisted, deformed, tortured, irrational. From the purulent pools she felt herself watched by motionless crocodiles and water monsters." Or again "Pamela had lingered watching the setting sun multicolored as some bird of the Indies. She was surprised to see the darkness well up so quickly." Village life and palm oil stews. The hysteria of bush fires. Their sudden quenching by a deluge of rain.

But Andre Gide's is pure travel diary, lazy even, and unedited. He

The Negro

Continued from First Page.

watches the process of palm oil extraction, and remarks that the interesting to observe it is not particularly interesting to write about. He says that he is beginning to know butterflies and lets it go at that. Sees pineapples in bloom for the first time, passion flowers in fruit for the first time, and leaves the reader to hunt descriptions elsewhere. Makes this note: "I must try in a few words to make people feel the superhuman beauty of the night on this little golden sandbank, surrounded by water, sky, solitude, and strangeness. Sometimes there passes by a flock of big cranes, whistling in their flight like a night express"—and then says in a footnote: "I cannot rewrite these notes, but leave them just as they are without trying to polish up my recollection." At one point he even includes the entry that he is afraid he is going to get bored at keeping a diary at all.

Part of his diary is commentary upon French and English classes that he happens to have brought along. Part of it undeveloped themes for familiar essays: "What a mistake it is not to rock children's cradles from their earliest babyhood! I even think it would be a good plan to calm them and send them to sleep by means of a special pitching and tossing apparatus. As for me, I was brought up according to rational methods and by my mother's orders never slept in beds that were not fixed; thanks to which, I am particularly liable to seasickness."

Nonetheless, out of these unarranged notes the experience emerges for the reader as tho he were having it himself, only more vividly, inasmuch as M. Gide has better eyes and ears for observing than most of us would have, and whatever other sense it is that makes the natives reveal themselves to him.

His mission had something to do with observing the condition of natives in the rubber-gathering companies of the Congo and the Lake Chad region. And his report is not promising. The companies demand from their agents more rubber than can be got by honest means. The agents resort to penalties and tortures. And even without these the conditions of the natives is not good. [illegible]

fin hideous forms—"We burned away, so as not to lose our appetites altogether"—comes by the hundreds of cases to [illegible] Sleeping sickness, of course. Skin diseases—you will hardly find a sound skin in a whole village — various conditions resulting from undernourishment. For there is somehow a belief among the ruling whites that employed negroes do not need to be fed—that they will find roots or berries or something.

And a moral condition that is worse. People—even negroes in central Africa—will work and presumably become thrifty if they can find things to want. But why should they bother to earn money when there is nothing to buy with it? And on the other hand, even supposing they did take an interest in money, what would their chances be? The natives are forced to take for their goats and chickens what the white man offers him. And who would go into the chicken business when he is not likely to be offered more than 50 centimes apiece.

And to top it all, an utter distrust that masters are always expressing in loud tones before negro servants who understand French perfectly. M. Gide was quite evidently not that kind of master. And yet even with the boy "Adoum" of whom he speaks always with consideration and affection there seems to have been that residue of despair. "I told you so because you seemed to expect it. People kept on telling me I had been on the loose. It was no good saying no. I shouldn't have been believed."

This is the thread upon which the book, like the journey itself, is strung. But all Africa hangs from it. Forests like the one described by M. Morand. Villages of strange architecture, that is also very beautiful. Fabulous animals, such as the dog-headed baboon - Negro dances: the plain tam-tam and the masked god dance. Negro music: "Imagine this tune yelled by a hundred persons, not one of whom sings the exact note. It is like trying to distinguish the main line among quantities of little strokes. The effect is prodigious and gives a polyphonic impression of harmonic richness. The same need makes them put beads on the wires of their little 'pianos'—a horror of the clean sound—a need to confuse and drown its contours."

Various European officials, pleasant and unpleasant, also negro sultans, appear as passing characters, with Marc and his bravery and fevers, Adoum and his observations—"After a man is dead among the people here it's like after the wind has gone by"—and the affectionate little pet sloth Dindiki—as companions of the journey.