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RECENT TRAVELER THROUGH THE CONGO

Harsh Treatment of Natives Under French and Belgian Colonial Systems Are Still Found

Some men there are who, in their discussions and descriptions, make their subjects live. Such a man is Andre Gide, who, in "Travels in the Congo" (Alfred A. Knopf, New York; $5), draws a moving and convincing picture of conditions in those sections claimed and ruled by the French and Belgians.

Fulfilling a boyhood ambition by going to the Congo, Gide found himself unable to stop writing. He kept a journal, which, overflowing with vitality and information, is now offered to the public.

It is difficult to imagine a more unlikely place to go roving in than the Congo jungles. But no more unconventional traveler ever set out upon a journey than Gide. Accompanied by a young friend and equipped with fountain pen, notebook and an assortment of brilliant books in addition to the regular traveler's paraphernalia, Gide set out from Brazzaville by boat, and in the course of his travels covered more than 2000 miles before his return to the West coast.

His observations and conclusions are summed up in the first chapter, when he declared that the native blacks are living under most intolerable conditions and that while:—

"La nature donne

"Des arbres aiguilliers et des fruits savoureux, people are dying of hunger. It seems impossible to cope with the famine."

Child Slavery

Much of the scenery bores Gide. While there are excellent passages of descriptions, it is patent from the outset that it is the people alone who really interest him. The French and Belgian colonial systems receive uncomplimentary analysis. The author is unsparing in his criticism of the rubber companies and their shameless exploitation and ill-treatment of the natives. Deliberate starvation, child labor, even slavery he finds and condemns.

For example: "In the meantime Marc went on exploring round the camp, according to his excellent custom of trying to find things out that are hidden from the light of day. He came in very late and very much upset by what he had just discovered; not far from our hut, in the middle of the guard's camping ground, a large band of children of both sexes, from 9 to 13 years old, are locked up in the open [illegible] half a few [illegible] wood huts.

"A native offered himself as interpreter and translated into French what Adonis remonstrated into French. The children seem to have been taken away from their villages with halters around their necks; they have been made to work for six days without pay and without anything to eat. Their village is far off; their parents, brothers, friends were expected to bring them food. No one did. Very unlucky, but it cannot be helped."

The last sentence does not express Gide's opinion. He was on a rubber plantation at the time and made it his business to right the matter. According to the system, the French planter did not actually put the children to work. He merely instructed the Negro overseers to see that the work was done and then closed his eyes to the whole methods followed. Not so Gide. The interpreter disappeared mysteriously and the entire village remained close-mouthed. But Gide found the interpreter chained in a gang of prisoners for his translation of what the children had said. Before he left Gide the children were receiving proper treatment. At least for the time being.

Mistreatment of Blacks

Gide never could accept the colonials' insistence that the natives were shiftless, treacherous and stupid. To quote again:

"The old fellow whom we took to be our pilot evidently expected to get nothing, for when we slipped a matabiche into his hand his face, which had been lowering, lighted up. I chaffed him about his gloomy looks; he began to laugh, took one of my hands in both of his, pressing it over and over again with touching warmth. What excellent people they are! and what diabolical act, what persistent want of understanding, what a policy of hatred and unfairness were necessary to obtain anything that could justify brutality, exactions and ill usage."

Nor could Gide see justice in the economic conditions forced upon the blacks. In every instance he found that the natives, where they were in contact with the whites, were forced to pay double for an article what the white man would pay for it. Thus a chicken or an egg would cost the Frenchman one franc and the Negro two. Yet such was the Negro's financial position that he could scarcely pay the one franc.

Gide found the black man possessing ability, courage, tenderness, intelligence and even ambition. Yet the latter he found thwarted despite the good work of the government schools and the mission fathers. Robbed of his land, poorly paid for his labor, there is little incentive for him to work, Gide finds. Few own a blanket, while any desire for trade is killed by lack of means to buy.

Missionaries and Doctors

Yet there are lights as well as shadows in the picture Gide paints of the Congo. The mission fathers, the white teachers and doctors are doing their best to alleviate the condition of the black.

At Mobayo in the Belgian country he found a Dr Cavavelli engaged in a life work of ministering to the needs of the people. In three years he had successfully treated and restored to virility 236 patients afflicted with elephantiasis of the genital organs while his work in other diseases, particularly venereal cures, has been most happily successful.

A touch of comedy also is present now and then. Gide shoots a hippopotamus for his pantry and permits them to cut up the animal for fresh meat and bring it aboard the sides and [illegible] of the [illegible] of which both he and Marc are made. With dripping cuts of hippo steak stacked around his boat Gide and Marc suffer agonies from unpleasant odors and sights; nevertheless the steaks remain until consumed.

Yet Gide can say: "I gaze, like King Canute, at the red and yellowish drops dripping to the floor . . . the cantens, my bag, the top of the mosquito-net, under which I take refuge. But what is all this compared to the Saras' joy, their laughter, their gratitude!"

Gide is ever conscious of the spirit of Joseph Conrad in the land and his book is filled with references to that great man who preceded him up those same rivers. Like Conrad he is moved to compassion by the misery of the black man, and like St Paul he cannot see the trees for the people.

His comments on the volumes he carried with him, Stevenson's, "The Master of Ballantrae," Meller's [illegible] Dante's works, Milton, Lord Bacon and many others, are as pungent as they are brief.

Gide's book has a [illegible] of interest.

S.D.G.