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ANDRE GIDE THE IDEAL TRAVELLER

TRAVELS IN THE CONGO. By Andre Gide. Translated from the French by Dorothy Bussy. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 375 pp. $5.

By A. B. BERND

When the novelist goes voyaging, he is apt to take with him the artificial perspective of his trade. Rarely, of course, does he get the length to which Mrs. Kilbride Lewis led the outrageous Horn; but often a mist of romance obscures his vision, or a fictional emphasis throws into unnatural proportion the various elements of his chronicle.

When the traveller goes scribbling, fresh dangers ensue. A Halliburton, it is true, can distance all novelists in the sentimental glow. But the Halliburtons are not these days frequent. The library of foreign investigation, for the most part, suffers from the commonplace character of the peoples visited, from the myopia of the author, or from the omniscient manner in which the tale is set forth.

Andre Gide has avoided pitfalls, and Andre Gide has given us at last the perfect travel book. The record of his wayfaring through French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon is the narrative of a still mysterious region, set down in the day-by-day manner in which its wonders first unfolded before the explorer's eyes, and this above all passed beneath the lens of a highly trained intelligence.

Primarily the interest here lies in the reaction of the novelist's sensitive spirit to the outer testimony of his senses. A writer who has developed the introspective method to a point of high excellence suddenly finds himself "charged with a mission . . . an official personage" and dropped into a strange land. Oh, for almost 40 years, he has sought to visit. It is a bizarre circumstance; yet Gide, the observer of Western civilization, is fully equipped for its demands. He does not forget his "mission," and he does not forget those daily entries in the journal, those analyses of new experiences, which constitute this book.

Native music? This disciple of Proust describes it first in words, then makes notation of its tones upon the staff. "Oh, if only Stravinsky could hear it!" he sighs. Architecture? The Massas' huts show "a beauty so perfect, so accomplished, that it seems natural." He pries into every corner of indigenous life, into dances and religious rites, agriculture and commerce, hunting, feasting and burying, sex customs, dialects and pathology.

And all of this becomes fundamental parts of the "mission." The journal is never quite clear about its aims, but one gathers that the author's purpose was the investigation of conditions among the natives in their relations with the French colonial and commercial agencies.

Scarcely is the Congo reached before the sigh is heaved:

> The immense pity of what I have seen has taken possession of me. I know things to which I cannot reconcile myself. What demon drove me to Africa? What did I come out to find in this country? I was at peace. I know now. I must speak.

What Gide knew, and what he later learned, makes this a record of exploitation to range beside the ancient Belgian oppressions.

Women with babies at their breasts were placed, in blinding downpours, at forced labor on the roads. Natives, taken forcibly from their villages, were shackled and compelled to work in distant fields and forests. Not only by their French masters, but even by other blacks placed in authority, were they robbed and beaten. They were ground beneath the weight of taxes, cheated by agents of the Compagnie Forestiere (rubber concessionaries), denied sufficient food and even the slight medical attention which regulations imposed. Killed or imprisoned on minor provocation, the Africans were forced often to seek refuge in jungles where death was certain. If they, or even the occasional honest white employe of the Compagnie, complained, retribution was rapid. Those who confessed their miseries to Gide begged him for protection; they knew that punishment awaited them for having "squealed."

"This is slavery," Gide cries at last in anguish: "temporary, I grant, but still slavery!"

What effect, one wonders, has this revelation had in France? The book was published there in 1927 and 1928. Certainly time sufficient for governmental action has elapsed since its appearance. Yet the reader ignorant of politico-commercial affairs in the Third Republic remains uninstructed about the outcome of Gide's exposures. One wishes that Mr. Knopf had included a word of introduction to clear up this point.

Gide is the ideal traveler. Easily he makes friends with the people of the forests; without complaint, he suffers the inconveniences of their ways. Most revealing of the many incidents attesting the author's adaptability is the story of the hippopotamus killed on the Logone and stored against future needs in the expedition's boats. The animal was so huge that its steaks and cutlets covered the vessels:

> In order to get to my bed, I have to scale a foot, and then climb a jaw and a big roll of skin thicker than any carpet. A heap of bleeding gobbets, of entrails, of unspeakably pestilential fragments, are spread out on the shimbeck (thatch roof of the boat) to dry in the sun; and festoons of purplish strips are hung by long cords on the whaleboats' sides. Horror! it is raining blood through the roof of my shimbeck! And not only blood--worse! I gaze like King Canute at the red and yellowish drops, dripping on to the floor, the canteens, my bag, the top of my mosquito-net, under which I take refuge."

And then the admission which makes Andre Gide Andre Gide:

> But what is all this compared to the Saras' joy, their laughter, their gratitude!

Never a word of complaint came from the lips of this sympathetic explorer. Nor were the Africans who accompanied him slow in understanding that their employer was an exceptional fellow. Though at first they greeted him as "Commander," the title soon changed to "Governor," and eventually even to "Government!"