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# The Road to Africa

*Black Magic.* By Paul Morand. Translated by Hamish Miles. The Viking Press. $3.

*Travels in the Congo.* By André Gide. Alfred A. Knopf. $5.

HERE are two books, each the product of a Frenchman who has observed the Negro. Beyond the nationality of the authors and their subject matter the linking abruptly ends. André Gide writes within the first score of pages of his notable "Travels in the Congo": "The less intelligent the white man is, the more stupid he thinks the black." It is unfortunate that M. Morand did not have this simple statement framed and hanging over his desk as he wrote "Black Magic."

For Morand, despite his boast of having traveled thirty thousand miles in visiting twenty-eight Negro countries (countries in which Negroes live), might far more profitably have spent all this time and energy observing one Negro and finding out what that Negro's thoughts and reactions really were before he began to write. Morand has most superficially though entertainingly looked at the outermost layers of Negro mentality; the result is an amusing and, at times, well written series of sketches of how Paul Morand thinks *he* would react were he a Negro. The low state of literary criticism in these United States is distressingly revealed by the reviews which have acclaimed Morand's "admirable detachment" and "cool objective realism" and by declarations that Morand's is "the first real picture of the Negro we have had."

Of what does this picture consist? Eight short stories laid variously in the United States, the West Indies, Europe, and Africa. Seven of the eight tales are as rigidly of a pattern as the stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The thesis of them all is that Negroes, no matter of what training, environment, economic circumstance, mental development, character or admixture of white blood, revert to primitive savagery the instant their surface culture is scratched. Consider, for example, Morand's most silly example of hobby-riding in the tale, Syracuse. A Negro, born in America, knowing little or nothing of Africa, a gifted business man and organizer, happens to wander into the Terhueren Museum at Brussels. There he sees a Congo mask—and promptly goes native. Congo tells of a dancer, grown famous in Parisian theaters and cabarets, who goes to her death after several improbable adventures which followed discovery of a "bad-luck" charm. Excelsior reveals Morand's notion (and probably no one else's) of what Negroes who cross the color line do and think. Good-bye, New York tries ludicrously to tell how a colored woman, wealthy, educated, and so fair none could distinguish the presence of Negro blood, also "goes native" when white prejudice causes her to be abandoned on a world cruise in Africa. In only one story, Charleston, does Morand tread on sure ground when he tells of the results of the attraction a black man has for a Southern white woman in southern France.

Despite its meretricious character, born of mere cleverness with little intellect or intelligent observation back of it, there are in "Black Magic" numerous pages of brilliant descriptive writing. The stories are amusing and interesting. The drawings by Aaron Douglas are superb additions to the book. This young Negro's work, which gained considerable attention in James Weldon Johnson's "God's Trombones," is maturing into a delicacy and sureness which mark him as one to be watched and appreciated as one of America's distinguished craftsmen.

Morand's superficiality can be seen after one has read half a dozen pages of Gide's lucid prose. "Travels in the Congo" is a day-by-day record of sights, smells, sounds, and reactions met with in a voyage through parts of Africa little traveled by whites. Gide not only is a profound writer of distinguished prose but he is an observer of keen perceptiveness who records what he sees and hears and not what preconceived notions make him think he sees and hears. Though M. Gide made his long journey in a semi-official capacity, that circumstance seems never to have stayed his hand in his ruthless criticism of those French companies and their agents who are so viciously exploiting the natives of these French colonies. Once on seeing enormous fields of unreaped manioc and castor oil he tells the reason—that all the men are "either gathering rubber, or in prison, or dead, or fled." In another place he reflects on the horrors of exploitation he has seen.

> I cannot content myself with saying, as so many do, that the natives were still more wretched before the French occupation. We have shouldered responsibilities regarding them which we have no right to evade. 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.

In the nearly four hundred pages of his book M. Gide proceeds then to tell all that he has seen. He does not limit himself to horrors or injustices by any means. He tells of the climate, the people, the terrain, conversations, what he has read en route, and his reactions to that reading. In brief, the book is a magnificent picture of a keenly sensitive and alert mind in its contact with new experiences. It is to be hoped that the book will have the circulation which it so richly deserves.

WALTER WHITE