André Gide in Africa

Travels in the Congo, by André Gide. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 375 pages. $5.

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THERE is a malicious and melancholy pleasure in comparing the relative literary importance of a work such as this present volume, "Travels in the Congo," with the works of Mr. Martin Johnson, for example, on the eastern territory of Equatorial Africa. The latter will be much more popular than André Gide's journal of his trip to Lake Chad, but of the superior value to human thought of the Frenchman's observations there can be no doubt. And this is the opinion of a reviewer who has been unable, so far, to read "The Counterfeiters," in spite of numerous determined attempts!

M. Gide, the illustrious novelist of France, made a journey of some official significance, which is not adequately explained in the book. The jacket announcement, to which one naturally turns for this information, bears brief bibliographical data and many irrelevant particulars concerning M. Gide's forthcoming novel, "A School for Wives." But when a travel-book is priced at five dollars, the reader has a right to expect some attention to his ignorance of current French affairs. Throughout the reading of the book one is bothered by the failure to comprehend just how and why a novelist sixty years old, instead of arriving in New York to be fêted and lionized by intellectual America, goes on an official journey involving such singular hardships. And one regrets, in a book of nearly four hundred pages, the lack of an index to locate the innumerable references. It may seem captious, but when the average intelligent citizen pays a good price for a book, he can dispense with "a note on the type in which this book is set up." But if he have any vital interest at all in the subject or the author of such a book, he will want an index.

The point of these criticisms, of course, is that the book of M. Gide is important. It is the production of a first-class European mind. M. Gide says memorable things, and his fellow traveler makes delightful and arresting photographs. But the publishers are in error when they imagine that "Travels in the Congo" depends for its value upon "the simple truth" about this particular part of the [illegible] of an in-

African scene. What holds us is the spectacle of ... tensely alive and complex modern intelligence in sudden contact with the lowest forms of human existence. "The simple truth" is rarely simple except to a simpleton. It is generally a compromise of general conclusions. This is apparent over and over again in M. Gide's daily record. The entries conflict one with another as he encounters conflicting evidence. And he sets it all down.

It is fascinating above all to read what André Gide is reading and his comments thereon. He delivers himself of a critical review of Bossuet's funeral orations. He enjoys "The Master of Ballantrae." He toys with the idea of translating "Mark Rutherford." He explores once more that superb masterpiece, "Heart of Darkness," as who would not on such a journey? Browning and Milton are enjoyed critically and even emotionally. Arnold Bennett's "Old Wives' Tale" is reread. And as he reaches "a flood of newspapers and reviews" on his homeward trek, he plunges in and discusses "*la poésie pure*," corrects a "celebrated novelist" who misquotes Baudelaire in *L'Illustration*, and deplores "the confusion of styles." And he learns, "from a few slating articles," that his own great work, "The Counterfeiters," has at last come out.

This book is too long. It should have been edited. And yet, one pauses to reflect, is it not better untouched? André Gide grows on one. His is a profound and charming personality. There is no help for it. "The Counterfeiters" must be tackled again!

WILLIAM MCFEE.