A Frenchman in Africa

TRAVELS IN THE CONGO.
By Andre Gide... *New York: Alfred A. Knopf... $5.*

Reviewed by
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ANDRE GIDE is a traveler after my heart. I had previously been won to Gide, the novelist, by his "Lafcadio's Adventures," "The Street Called Straight" and "The Counterfeiters." Now, as a writer of travel, he captures me on the first page when, in reply to the question of his steamship companions, "What are you going out for?" he answers, "I shall see when I get there."

Few writers of travel approach their subject with this honest absence of prejudice or of preconceived ideas. Tomlinson, Norman Douglas and Stark Young, perhaps, but not many others.

Gide goes on to say that he has plunged into this journey like Curtius into the gulf. "I feel," he writes, "as if I had not so much willed it (though for many months I have been stringing my will up to it) as had it imposed upon me by a sort of irreluctable fatality. . . . And I come near forgetting that it is nothing but a project made in youth and realized in maturity. I was barely twenty when I first made up my mind to make this journey to the Congo—thirty-six years ago."

"Travels in the Congo" is an essentially personal book; related in the desultory day-by-day manner. Yet it is personal only in the sense that it is a frankly intimate record of what the author saw and heard, felt and thought, in the Congo. It is never self-conscious. There is never the most remote suggestion of self-exploitation.

Gide is never the tiresome Jack Horner traveler, putting in a thumb to pull out a plum and shout "What a brave boy am I!" And he is equally far from that mock humility which has acquired the subtle technique of a self-disparagement. Sincerity is stamped upon every word and between every line of "Travels in the Congo."

Also characteristic of the narrative is Gide's love of nature and his keenly developed power of observation. No sight or sound or odor escapes him. Birds and beasts, butterflies and beetles are recorded with the loving exactitude of the naturalist. So that it is with astonishment that one recalls that André Gide is also the sophisticated, essentially modern man who wrote "The Counterfeiters"! And running through this book on the Congo, appearing and reappearing, is Gide's poignant love of life.

The ability to combine sentiment (never sentimentality) with sophistication is, I think, the most endearing of all the Latin qualities, and rare in the Anglo-Saxon. When we are clear-sighted and without illusions or hypocrisy we are often cynical, vain of our barren hardness and suspicious of those who know how to abandon themselves to the beauty of living.

But Gide, being blessedly Latin, can feel without shame and without crossing the boundary line which divides the land of emotion from the land of gush. In his black servant, Adoum, and in his little pet sloth, Dindiki, he has tenderly drawn two deeply moving pictures. "Through Adoum," he says, "I have come to feel a whole race of suffering humanity—a poor, oppressed people whose beauty, whose worth we have failed to understand . . . whom I wish it was in my power never to leave." And when he says good bye to his forty Negro porters he does not hesitate to confess [illegible] to his eyes.

All this is, however, subsidiary to what eventually dominates his journey. In a footnote early in the book he writes: "I could not foresee that the questions of our dealing with the natives, which are so distressingly urgent and which I had then only caught a glimpse of, would soon engage my attention so much as to become the chief interest of my journey and that I should find in them the *raison d'être* of my presence in the country. But I was soon to learn."

"I am unable to sleep. . . . 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?"

By Page 72 André Gide has found the answer to the question:

"What did I come out to find in this country?" . . . "I was at peace. . . . I know now. I must speak."

He then proceeds to set down what he has seen of the formidable power and influence of the great commercial companies which exploit Africa; of what he believes to be the two terrible impediments of the French administration of equatorial Africa—want of sufficient staff and want of sufficient money—and of the consequent wrongs from which the natives suffer.

And he writes always with that quality of temperance which he so rightly believes to be essential in art.

Aside from this great underlying motive of humanity, one welcomes "Travels in the Congo" as a revelation of André Gide himself; for in journeying with him, in apprehending through his keenly developed senses, in reflecting with him upon the books which he selected to take with him, in sharing the emotions, the enthusiasms, the indignations and the affections which Africa aroused in so rare and versatile an intelligence the reader is inevitably the richer.

As for Africa . . . it is good for Africa that although civilization has sent ladies to be photographed perched upon slain beasts, and is responsible for the organized exploitation of the Dark Continent, it has also produced an André Gide with the heart to understand and with a great artist's gift of expression!