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M. GIDE IN THE CONGO

ANDRÉ GIDE. *Travels in the Congo*. Translated from the French by Dorothy Bussy. (Knopf, 15s. net.)

It is customary to lament that all parts of the globe are now open to inspection, that no travellers can bring back reports of the marvellous and unexpected. And yet are there not some compensations, at any rate to those who stay at home, for the absence of unexplored countries? For the marvellous soon hardens into the conventionally romantic. Orcs and crocodiles are the commonplace of literature and the anthropophagi mere schoolboys' cannibals. After the first explorers there come too soon those who seek to repeat the first shock of surprise by artificially heightening the romances. But by now it must be apparent that no amount of rhetorical colour can restore the first interest of unfamiliarity, and travellers must, if they are to interest, use not only their legs and their eyes, but their intelligence. M. Gide expressly intended to get "off the beaten track" and to penetrate into the heart of the country which he was to visit, but he was never very far away either from depôts for petrol, the iniquities of rubber companies or telegraph poles. In the heart of darkness he learns that M. Valéry has been elected to the Academy. His appetite for wonder, and that of the reader, must chiefly be exercised on such things as butterflies, plants of which the flowers are grey, and the beautiful shapes of some native huts. The rest is only for the intelligence, or for a sensibility which cannot be content with simple marvels.

M. Gide's primary motive in making this voyage—after all, sufficiently arduous for a literary man presumably used to comfort—was not perhaps so very remote from that of early travellers, curiosity, interest, the various motives which every one has for travelling and to which one gives the mere pleasure on one's passport. If his travelling companions asked him what he was going out for he would answer that he would see when he got there. But he had also a secondary motive, which seems to have had official approval—to explore the abuses of Government, the hardships of the natives, the tyranny of traders, rightly supposing that a simple tourist might discover more than an official person. He did in fact encounter serious abuses. Of these he writes admirably—no very easy thing to do—avoiding all rhetoric and never making conventional appeals in the name of humanity. He simply records how such abuses affect a sensitive mind, an argument more effective than most fine speeches. Unlike many clever and even sensitive travellers who must conceal their horror by cynicism, M. Gide is able to express his feelings freely and get with sentimentality. He simply behaves like a man of feeling. Doubtless this was easier for him than for the ordinary traveller, since he could hope to right some of the wrongs which he observed.

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He found the natives charming and singularly honest. Indeed it is curious that they are not even more put upon than they are, since they are extremely patient and incapable of striking a bargain. Apparently in some districts they always charge the white man about a third of the price for their goods that they would ask of another native. Of course they are stupid, but, as M. Gide says, it is the honest stupidity of animals. They cannot properly understand weights and measures, so that the companies which employ them to pick rubber easily exploit them; nor can they even count money when this becomes at all difficult. They respond at once to the slightest kindness, and yet M. Gide found that those who had control of them often thought that they could not be managed except by the harshest measures. M. Gide, it should be said, strikes one as an unusually impartial observer, not at all prejudiced against the Government or the traders of his own country or anxious to prove the perfect nobility of the savage.

But this discovery of abuses was fortunately only a minor part of M. Gide's journey. Most of his observations were made for their own sake. He has the capacity of making everything interesting, whether it is an account of the habits of hookworms which burrow into the feet, the effects of heat, the behaviour of termites, the dances of natives, or his affection for an engaging animal, a potto, of which he made a pet. M. Gide goes into all the circumstances of his journey in much more detail than most travellers, but he is never uninteresting and is often delicate and subtle. Travelling provides for him a perpetual flow of incentives to thought and a constant enlargement of the sensibility. Mme. Bussy's translation is admirable. One would not guess that it is a translation, since she has so definite a style of her own, a style not artificial but literary. The book is greatly improved by some excellent photographs, which do not appear in the French edition.

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