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CLIPPING FROM

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TRAVELS IN THE CONGO by *André Gide* (KNOFF. \$5.00)

*Travels in the Congo* is chiefly interesting for its revelations of some of the preoccupations of one of the finest of contemporary novelists, a novelist who, in a time of great temptation, has not forgotten that prose fiction must ultimately stand or fall on its projection of character, of personality. The book is extremely difficult to read at a stretch, being the random diurnal jottings of the impressions gathered on an African journey that must have so tired the author as to leave him with little desire to write ingratiatingly. Yet, it is worth the effort to a student of Gide. In spite of weariness, hookworm, heat, fever and monotony, the curiosity of the man never ceases to function. He is constantly speculating on the nature of man, for the most part savage man, since the voyage up the Congo

and the return from Lake Chad brought contact with few whites. Gide is here revealed, as elsewhere, as a moralist who lacks a stereotyped code; he is continually ruminating on "values" and, though he finds it difficult to do much condemning, he is forever protesting in a fairly dispassionate tone that kindness to the equatorial native would pay in the cash-value sense, as well as in other senses. The book contrasts very strongly with the work of another Frenchman on the Negro, Paul Morand's *Black Magic*, and it is Gide who carries off all the honors. Where Morand is shallow, flashy and bent on gaining the effect of speed in his writing, Gide is thoughtful. He is neither concerned with the black race as material for what Claude McKay calls "society" fiction about the Negro, nor is he, like Wyndham Lewis, wildly apprehensive about the possible capitulation of western standards of order and differentiation before an onslaught of primitive emotionalism from the jungle. The black man, as he is projected from *Travels in the Congo*, seems a pitiable figure, incapable of doing any more than slightly coloring the stream of western thought. Gide sees no bogie.

Perhaps an index to Gide's esthetic credo is to be found in the frequent references to purity of line and purity of light (or their lack) in the African landscape and day. Nearing Lake Chad, Gide expresses rapture that he is getting away from "recent formlessness". Later, he says: "This notion of differentiation, which I have acquired here, and from which proceeds the sense both of the exquisite and of the rare, is so important that it seems to me the principal thing. I shall bring away from this country". He says this some pages and days after he has admitted to having been a Bergsonian "without knowing it". Evidently the truth, for Gide, lies somewhere between the positions of Bergson and Julien Benda.

Dorothy Bussy's translation preserves the quality of Gide's writing, which is admirable because it is clear and linear, even where it

is most hurried. Although there is none of the overtone or undertone of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, to the memory of whose author Gide dedicates his book, one finishes *Travels in the Congo* with the sense of having experienced an adventure through Belgian and French equatorial Africa.

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN