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## Negro Reduced to Sad Peonage, Author Reports

"Travels in Congo" Is Sensational, Fascinating Diary of Civilized Frenchman

TRAVELS IN THE CONGO. By Andre Gide. Translated by Dorothy Bussy Knopf. \$5.

Reviewed by Louis Sherwin

THIS book should be commended particularly to the attention of good souls who derive enjoyment—and publicity—through waxing lugubrious over the condition of the negro in America. Not that his lot is any too fat and lolly. But after all, if his forebears had not been enslaved and brought over here he might be in Africa now and under the French administration. And the hardships of that existence are, to be vernacular, just nobody's business.

Reading between the lines of M. Gide's fascinating "Travels in the Congo" one may reasonably come to the conclusion that the white man is doing to the African what we, in our benevolent, kind Christian way, did to the Indian. Except, of course, that we did not commit the outrage of compelling the aborigines here to work. That is a modern European refinement not flattering to contemplate. But our methods were quite efficient, as anybody can perceive by trying to find an Indian, not necessarily a prosperous or happy Indian, just an Indian.

M. Gide went to French Equatorial Africa on an official mission. Complaints of cruelty, oppressive treatment of the natives and ruthless exploitation had been rife for years.

Now it is a tribute to the sincerity of the French Government that they chose a man of Andre Gide's caliber to conduct an investigation into these rumors. Of the wide culture and understanding, a rare specimen in that he is a cosmopolitan Frenchman, a man of absolutely sound balance—in short, one of the six most civilized fellows in his country—he was sure to bring back the truth in so far as it was humanly attainable.

AND the truth is not pretty. Evidently a wholesale system of peonage exists throughout the region. The negroes are made to work for the big companies who own the concessions. They are cheated, poorly nourished, punished without mercy by a code they do not understand. The subordinate officials of the French administration are under the thumbs of the big companies' representatives who take good care to keep them under obligations.

As a mild instance of the exploitation that is going on M. Gide describes the capers of one representative agent:

"He employs the natives to work at rubber for a wage of twenty-five francs a month plus one franc's worth of rations every Saturday; otherwise they are neither fed nor lodged. They are what is called 'volunteer laborers' who prefer even this lamentable situation to being requisitioned by the administration. This terrifies them to such an extent that they desert their villages and hide in inaccessible places in the bush.

"He does not conceal his fury against the English traders who are so stupid as to pay the natives direct the price the stuff fetches on the market—which spoils our trade."

And again:

"At Bamblo, on September 8, ten rubber-gatherers (twenty according to later information) who work for the Compagnie Forestiere, because they had not brought in any rubber the month before, were condemned to go round and round the factory under a fierce sun, carrying very heavy wooden beams. If they fell down they were forced up by guards flogging them with whips. The 'ball' began at 8 o'clock and lasted the whole day, with Messrs. Facha and Maudurier, the company's agents, looking on."

WHEN I said this was a fascinating book I did not mean it was so entirely because of its descriptions of these unlovely practices. "Travels in the Congo" is, in the main, a transcription of the diary of a supremely civilized and interesting man on an unusual voyage. His observations on the manners, customs and character of the negroes are of real value. He says, for one thing, that the excessive eroticism attributed to the negroes by French colonists is bosh. He finds them, on the whole, a stupid but pathetic and ingratiating folk.

"The contact of Islam elevates and spiritualizes these people. The Christian religion . . . only too often turns them cowardly and sly."

Which confirms an opinion I have long held.

"Their rhythmical and melodic invention is prodigious, but what shall I say of their harmonics? . . . I thought all songs here would be monophonic. This is the reputation that has been made for them, for there are never any songs in thirds or sixths. But this polyphony, in its widening and narrowing of the sound, is so puzzling to our northern ears."

In another passage, too long to quote here, M. Gide achieves an interesting and more elaborate analysis of the singing of the boatmen, evidently quite unlike any of the so-called negro music in America.

His observations of native life are interspersed with acute comments on the books he took with him for reading. They included Goethe, Racine, Moliere, Corneille, Conrad and, believe it or not, "The Master of Ballantrae."

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