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BOOKS

HAPPY TRAVELLER

Robert Gibbings in the South Seas

Happy is he who journeys everywhere. Like to Ulysses, or him who won the Fleece, Then, full of worldly lore, returns in peace . . .

THESE lines of the French poet, Du Bellay, sum up the classical attitude to travel. They define something that is true in the experience of all good travellers—the pleasures of travel and those of coming home. Yet they leave much unsaid; for, at least to the great traveller, travel is itself a series of home comings. The traveller doesn't remain an outsider, an observer of curious things; he becomes a part of the society in which, for the time being, he has taken up his abode. And almost everywhere he finds something to which his personality can respond with a particular completeness. The differing standards of values among diverse communities enable him to give fuller expression than before to some interest or some capacity in himself. So that, as he travels, he continually thinks: my life has been a journey in search of this place which I have now found.

Mr. Gibbings is such a traveller. The further he goes, the more he seems at home. In earlier books he has introduced us to unexpected, and charming, company in England and Ireland. On this occasion* he takes us on a leisurely journey through Polynesia—from Tonga to Samoa, to the Cook Islands, to Tahiti and Moorea, to the Tuamotu Archipelago. Always we are among friends, and at the end we agree readily enough

*"Over the Reefs," by Robert Gibbings. With woodcuts by the author. J. M. Dent and Sons. English price, 15s.

A talk by DR. J. W. DAVID-
SON in the BBC's Third
Programme

with his closing words. They are quoted from a Tahitian woman who was looking back on her trip to Europe: "Often," she said, "I think of all those people who are sad because they have not any food to eat, and here in the Islands we have so very much for everyone, and so much happiness."

Three Earlier Visitors

Of course, it isn't surprising that Mr. Gibbings enjoyed the South Seas. Europeans of sensibility have generally been pleasantly excited by that gracious, colourful, and unhurrying world. If we turn to the writings of those who have left a record we find a great measure of agreement as to the qualities which they have valued most. For example, let us consider the experience of three men who reached the Pacific about sixty years ago. There was the Scot, Robert Louis Stevenson, who arrived in 1888 and finally settled in Samoa in 1891. There was the Bostonian, Henry Adams, who spent part of 1890 and 1891 in the Islands; and the French painter, Paul Gauguin, who arrived in Tahiti in 1891. All were middle-aged, and all had passed through years of trouble. Stevenson had been ill for most of his life; Adams, deeply disturbed by the suicide of his wife and exhausted by the writing of his great history of the formative years of the United States; Gauguin had been rent between his duty to his family and

to his vocation as a painter. When they reached the Islands, all but the memory of former difficulties seemed washed away. Soon Gauguin wrote: "I begin to think simply, to have only a little hatred for my neighbour—to like him better. . . . I escape from the artificial, I enter upon the natural." And listen to Henry Adams, describing an evening entertainment in Samoa: "The mysterious depths of darkness behind, against which the skins and dresses of the dancers mingled rather than contrasted; . . . the conviction that we were as good Polynesians as our neighbours—the whole scene and association gave so much freshness to our fancy that no future experience short of being eaten will ever make us feel so new again."

Stevenson's experience hardly needs re-telling. In Samoa he found new health, but also—and perhaps more import-



Spencer Digby photograph

ROBERT GIBBINGS

"The further he goes, the more he seems at home"

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