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ant—a life which he could share in to the full. He was able to look back on his past forebodings: "I feared I should make a mere shipwreck and yet timidly hoped not. I feared I should never make a friend, far less a wife, and yet passionately hoped I might." How differently it had turned out! At "Vailima" he was the centre of a large family circle, the master of a considerable Samoan entourage, the respected counsellor of high chiefs. It was these last Samoan years which brought his personality, and so also his work, to full maturity.

But the story is the same if one turns from those who had difficulties to escape from to the young and assured. Rupert Brooke wrote home from Samoa in 1913, concealing excitement beneath a simulated weariness: "It's all true about the South Seas! I get a little tired of it at moments, because I am too old for Romance. But there it is; there it wonderfully is." And when he was back in England the memory lingers? "If ever you miss me suddenly, one day, from Lecture Room B in King's, or even from the Moulin d'Or at lunch, you'll know . . . that I've gone back."

The Islands Themselves

The experiences of the writers themselves in the South Seas are thus well known to us. But how much have they told us about the Islands? How far have they succeeded in communicating an impression of the quality of life among the Island people? We certainly know what the Islands look like. Whether we go to the narratives of the 18th Century explorers—Cook, or Bougainville, or La Perouse—or to the South Sea writings of Dana, or Melville, or Stevenson, we can find many admirable descriptions of the scenery of the South Seas. Indeed, we know from childhood reading the difference between a

"high" island, with its densely forested mountains, and its surrounding barrier reef, and an atoll, lying like a wreath upon the sea, its narrow rim of coconut-planted land surrounding a blue-green lagoon. We know the brilliant hues of the hibiscus, the waxy-white of the frangipani, the look of oranges among their dark green foliage, the leaves of the banana tree, large enough to be used as an umbrella. We have heard in our imagination the unceasing roar of the waves upon the reef and seen the sun glistening upon the bodies of flying-fish as they rise from the water.

But how much do we know about the people of the Islands? Probably, as with the scenery, our knowledge is restricted to appearances. We know that the Polynesians are tall and well-built, bronze-skinned, with black wavy hair, strikingly handsome by European standards; that their bearing and manners are dignified and graceful. Many of the writers don't tell us much more than that. They describe the people with the meticulous accuracy which suffices for plants or birds, but fails to communicate any understanding of a people's humanity. When they venture further the picture has often been falsely coloured by the light of some preconceived theory. It is so, for example, with the 18th Century naturalist who accompanied one of the explorers. He described the Tahitians as "men without either vices, prejudices, wants or dissensions" who "recognise no other God but love." The first missionaries to Tahiti described the same people as "wild, disorderly" savages, "dancing and capering like frantic persons about our decks." Only occasionally, generally in the obscure book of some retired trader or adventurer, is there a living portrait of a Polynesian.

Few Real Successes

When real human beings do appear in the better known books with a South Sea Island setting, they are generally European or, at least, persons of partly European ancestry. It requires a smaller leap of the imagination to understand a man who looks back to far-off evenings in the Cafe Royal or a chapel in Tooting, or who claims descent from Henry VII, than to understand one whose memories centre upon *kava* ceremonies or the intricate problems of succession to native titles. Yet even here the successes have not been numerous. We cannot go to Stevenson, for he did not get nearer to accurate characterisation than in his portrayal of Wiltshire, the trader in *The Beach of Falesa*. The trader's appearance is described accurately enough, and his actions are credible. But Stevenson failed to catch the vein of understatement, the significant silences, which would have marked his conversation. Wiltshire talks like one of Mr. Stevenson's highly articulate friends. It is not, I think, till we reach Mr. Somerset Maugham that the lethargic planters, the nervously excited missionaries, the seedy clerks who have taken to drink, enter the pages of literature. But these, of course, are only a few of the types of Europeans to be met with, and Mr. Maugham wisely refrains from attempting to draw Polynesians in any detail.

And so, belatedly, I return to Mr. Gibbins's book; for it is, pre-eminently, a book filled with people. They pace through its pages with all the vigour of the men and women who dwell in

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