

Cut Finger

NEVER NEGLECT AN INJURY—HOWEVER SLIGHT

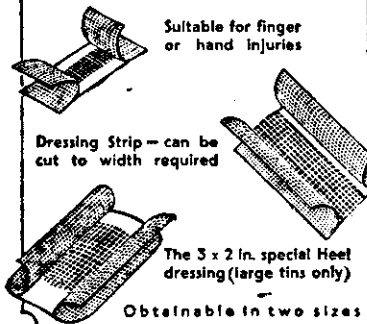


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"Over the Reefs"

(continued from previous page)

the South Seas—chiefs and native pastors, schooner captains, half-caste traders, government officials, their wives and their children.

It is not, of course, that Mr. Gibbings neglects the physical background, but he is able to save himself much purely descriptive writing through his admirable wood engravings. And what engravings they are, combining strength with delicacy, and serving as a medium for Mr. Gibbings's unflagging wit and enthusiasm! Indeed, one's regret at approaching the end of a chapter is considerably mitigated by the excitement of wondering what is going to be served up as a tail-piece—an exquisitely engraved hibiscus, a colourfully marked fish, a cooked pig watching us with a glazed eye from his platter, or a curiously clad small boy. And then there are

the more ambitious engravings, such as the magnificent one of Papetoai Bay, in the island of Moorea, with its fantastically eroded peaks rising like New York skyscrapers from a shore fringed with palm trees, or the two that show breaking waves, which have captured the fleeting moment before the wave finally disintegrates on the reef.

Fact and Fiction

But there is so much in the text that needs mentioning that I shall say no more about the engravings. Perhaps it is well to begin with my one regret—that Mr. Gibbings does not add a note explaining his method of work. It is easy, at the moment, for anyone who knows the Islands, to see what he has done; but the book is too valuable—as an account of the actual state of things—for the future student to be left in doubt as to what is fact and what fiction. Most of the characters are drawn straight from life, but a few are fictitious and many of the speeches and conversations appear to be a distilling of the spirit of much actual talk. It is worth saying this, because Mr. Gibbings is such a scrupulous observer that his fictions are quite as authentic, in spirit, as his straight reporting.

The best chapters, I think, are those dealing with Samoa. By contrast with the Cook Islands and Tahiti, where Mr. Gibbings also spent much of his time, Samoa has been little changed by the impact of the West. The Samoans have remained proudly true to their ancient culture. They have maintained the traditional crafts, such as house-building and bark-cloth making. They have refused to adopt European dress. Ceremony has been modified to accord with the demands of mission teaching, but it has not lost its importance; and even the Christian Church has been made an instrument of Samoan culture. Traditional dances, too, have not lost their hold. As Mr. Gibbings writes: "Even before they can walk, Samoan children learn to dance. Babies in their mothers' arms, looking on while others *siva*, wave and clap their hands in time with the

music; tiny children, swaying on unsteady feet, posture and wriggle to the rhythm of the drums. Many a time, when grown-up men and women were dancing, I have seen children edging in from the outskirts of the *fale*, intent on every movement of their elders, hardly able to restrain their own desire for action." There are many passages in the section of the book on Samoa which I wish had time to quote.

But, indeed, the book can be opened almost anywhere with the certainty of

finding good things. Let me quote two references to the Cook Islands. First, Mr. Gibbings's conversation on the world's religions with a wise old Rarotongan, who ended it with the remark: "All religions are the same when they are alive. It is only when they begin to die that they begin to differ." Second, his account of the austere splendour

welcome given to him by the London Missionary Society congregation in Mangaia. It began with an invitation which said: "We shall be too please if you accept our kind invitation without fail. Please reply before your decision." It continued with a church service, when he was offered a pillow to sit on embroidered with the motto: "Good luck to love." And it concluded with a feast for himself and the Pastor, at the end of which he was briefly told, like a small boy who had been subjected to discipline: "Now you may go."

Yes, *Over the Reefs* is full of good things. And there is always Mr. Gibbings himself, arguing, telling stories, enjoying himself enormously. But, of course, Mr. Gibbings is an Irishman, so perhaps success came to him less hardly. For the spirit which underlies Polynesian culture—personal, uncomplicated, untainted by experience of mass living—is the spirit which some have found in the Athens of Aeschylus and which some, like myself (and assuredly Mr. Gibbings) have sought for and found in the west of Ireland.

A BOOK ABOUT WATERSIDERS

THE WELLINGTON WATERSIDERS. By P. N. Pettit. Published by the Wellington Watersiders' Industrial Union of Workers.

THIS is obviously the expansion of a thesis for an M.A. degree. It is carefully prepared, well documented and set out, and it equally carefully avoids any discussion of the really important matters that emerge during the survey. Certain things that the public should know are very well presented; for example, the efforts to mitigate the casual nature of waterside work and the ceaseless struggle for better conditions of labour. Since an industry does not develop in a vacuum some analysis of the relations of the watersiders to the community as a whole would appear necessary. It is not, however, sufficiently stressed that waterside work is the most dangerous occupation in New Zealand as far as accidents are concerned. An examination of the factors making for danger and of what constitutes "dirt money"