

cloak-and-dagger underground of illegal plotting—that comparatively happy underground of the Bolshevik struggle against the Czar—but the deep, silent, rending secrecy of the mind, the last refuge of man, whose every other dimension is boarded up. His struggle against his own conceptual world: this is the modern tragedy of the disillusioned Communist—and on this subtler and profounder level Mr. Soloviev's novel is less successful.

We have had other descriptions of this tragic drama placed before us, in Arthur Koestler's "Darkness at Noon," for example, or in Whittaker Chambers's more personal "Witness." Beside these statements, Mr. Soloviev's is markedly naive and shallow. His Mark Surov is revealed to be a flat figure devoid of depth. A man who has gone as far through fire and pitch as Surov cannot conceivably speak any longer in the accents of purity. Koestler and Chambers, each in his own way, made that quite clear. Surov remains a romantic convention much as the hero of any of the current "historical" romances. This is too bad in a novel so well equipped in its basic materials as this one.

Fiction Notes

COLUMBUS'S COMPANIONS: James Street's new novel, "The Velvet Doublet" (Doubleday, \$3.50), is not, certainly, the best historical novel of the past twelve-month, but it is indisputably a good one, and it is enhanced by one of the most ingenious choices of a hero that I have seen. For it is the story of the nebulous Rodrigo de Triana—who in this book later becomes Madurra, the Moor. Rodrigo is the man whom even the most conservative and pro-Columbus historians acknowledge was the one who first cried "Tierra!" when San Salvador was sighted—and do not explain why the great admiral did not ever pay him the promised reward.

It is also the story of Columbus himself, and if it paints redheaded Christopher—though in the end it admits he dreamed dreams—as a shabby and scheming self-promoter who was not even a good sailor or good navigator, there are two justifications. First, it is Columbus as seen through the not-unprejudiced eyes of a man whom he had admittedly wronged. And second, it says nothing about the discoverer which, although either unproved or unprovable, was not at some time believed.

Added to this is a love story involving two beautiful women—Maraela (Continued on page 57)

Faraway Places. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the latter months of 1952, in a literary way, was the number of good books about adventure in exotic lands. The trend continues strong into the new year: we have many fine books to review this week; we will have more in weeks to come. Africa, the Far East, the high seas—these are the faraway places where readers are finding escape from atomic age anxieties. From East Africa J. A. Hunter reports on his career as a big-game hunter in "Hunter" (page 14); from West Africa Rebecca Reyher describes her investigation of polygamy in the Cameroons in "The Fon and His Hundred Wives" (page 13); journeys through Cambodia and Indo-China in search of relics in one of the most mysterious of cities are recorded in Martin Birnbaum's "Angkor and the Mandarin Road" (page 15).

Gentle Duties of Conquest

WE CHOSE THE ISLANDS. By Sir Arthur Grimble. New York: William Morrow & Co. 340 pp. \$5.

By AMY LOVEMAN

IT IS not often that so fascinating a combination of personal history and informal anthropology turns up as this book of Sir Arthur Grimble's. It has adventure and novelty and wit to recommend it and a captivating blitheness of spirit. Sir Arthur is that best type of British civil servant who goes to distant lands, learns the habits and language of the natives, deals with them with the exactest justice, delves into their culture and traditions, and takes whatever comes of danger or deprivation in the course of his duty with an easy humor. He has, moreover, the Englishman's love of the open, and a fluent pen to depict landscape and nature. Lovely descriptions of scenery make a frame for his portrayal of island life. But it is his description of the people and their ways and his recital of their myths and legends which make his book enthralling.

Long before the Second World War had made the name of Tarawa known to the American public Sir Arthur

Grimble, plain Arthur Grimble then, had begun his acquaintance with it and with other central Pacific islands. He was a young and timorous British civil servant, on the threshold of his professional career, when in 1913 he found himself nominated for a cadetship in the Gilbert and Ellice Protectorate, and a bewildered, but eager youth, newly wed, filled with vast ignorance, vast hope, and alternating fear and determination, when in 1914 he set out on a service that was to keep him in the Pacific until the middle of the Second World War. "We Chose the Islands" deals with the first six years of his experience there.

It deals with them wittily, gaily, but yet with scientific exactitude. Sir Arthur had an observant eye and unquenchable curiosity, and he made it a point to make friends with the natives from his early initiation as a guest into one of the best Baanaban families when he committed the unpardonable oversight of failing to belch loudly after a friendly draught of coconut milk to his final eerie visit to the shack of a sorceress who summoned whistling ghosts about him. He attended their ceremonies and watched the working of their courts, investigated their religious beliefs, and took part in their festivities. Always there were new and surprising experiences. There were domestic crises, as when clouds of cockroaches came flying into the house; or when a nineteen-year-old girl put a spell on the Grimble's oven in the hope that its baking would become so execrable as to induce her brother to beat his wife, her hated and hateful sister-in-law (and succeeded); or when a Gilbertese young woman offered herself tearfully for Sir Gilbert's



—By Thomas Pomfret,
from "We Chose the Islands."

nightly comfort after his wife, about to bear him a child, had presented the girl with a bottle of scent, all unknowing that in Tarawan custom the gift obligated the recipient to act as substitute wife until the expected baby had arrived. There was the hair-raising occasion, early in his island career, when Sir Arthur, feeling that the prestige of the British Empire demanded his acceptance, allowed himself to be taken octopus hunting—a horrifying business since it was accomplished by Sir Arthur's diving under water, offering himself as bait to the octopus while a native, standing on the coral reef above him, thrust a spear into the fish as it began to wind its tentacles about its human prey.

And there was the occasion of the porpoise calling. Porpoise, it appears, is a diet essential to chieftainship since it produces the bulging paunch which is the proper accoutrement of a man



of rank. "You," said a native to Sir Arthur, "are in truth the skinniest white man ever seen in these islands," and finding that unfitting for one of a ruling race proposed that he persuade his Tarawan kinsmen, hereditary porpoise callers, to summon the porpoise-folk from their home under the horizon in order that Sir Arthur might wax fat upon them. Great were the preparations for the event. All day the women and children wove wreaths and the men waited, and toward evening the most expert of the callers whose gift it was to have his spirit depart from his body in a dream to summon the porpoise, came hurtling through the screens of his shack, and galloped down to the beach, shouting to the people to follow. They came with cries and cheers, and began crooning for the fish, and, lo and behold—But why finish the story? Let Sir Arthur tell it, and the beautiful myths of the people as well. Among them is one poetic legend which closely approximates the Biblical story of the expulsion from Paradise and the Greek legend of Pandora's box.

The light and the serious are happily commingled in Sir Arthur's narrative; it is full of fascinating fact and equally full of a delightful buoyancy and wit. This is the best kind of adventure book, written by the best kind of adventurer.

One Hundred Problems Plus

THE FON AND HIS HUNDRED WIVES. By Rebecca Reyher. New York: Doubleday & Co. 318 pp. \$3.95.

By ASHLEY MONTAGU

A YOUNG Anglo-American nun, working in Bamenda Province, British Cameroons, published an article relating what she had heard about the injustices of African marriage in her province. The person mentioned most frequently in her article was the chief or Fon of Bikom, who was said to have at least 600 wives. Sister Loretta's story was picked up by newspapers all over the world.

Sister Loretta's article, and the supporting protests which followed it, eventually reached the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations in the

entertaining narrative, Mrs. Reyher's book represents an important human document. It is to be hoped that it will play a role in helping to liberate African women from the slavery and cruelty of which they have so long been the unhappy victims. It is to be hoped, too, that the United Nations will take a leaf out of Mrs. Reyher's book, and learn from it that, while stiff shirts a commission may make, it is the human heart behind the sternum that is the important thing. The U.N. Commission failed in learning the truth, where Mrs. Reyher with a less formal, more human, approach succeeded. I wonder whether there was a single woman on the U.N. Commission.

Mrs. Reyher learned a great deal about the Fon and his wives long before she got to see him. Her pen portraits of everyone from whom she gleaned her information reflect something of the warmth of her own nature—she is sweet where others might have been acid. All persons mentioned in the book are referred to by their own names and are really real. It must have been somewhat difficult to navigate a course through the rocks and reefs of so many living personalities, but Mrs. Reyher, both in Africa and in her book, has contrived to do so with eminent success.

The Fon and his wives are most sympathetically (in the Italian sense of that word) portrayed, and one has the feeling that these portraits are as full-rounded and as authentic as they could be. Mrs. Reyher, not unsurprisingly, found the Fon and his people about as human as people are anywhere—neither more nor less so.

There have been some who have argued that polygamy is an admirable institution. I have, in fact, recently heard a high-born Nigerian lady assert that she would much rather be a member of a polygamous household than of a monogamous one, and since there are a million and a half "surplus" women in the United States, I have even heard the case for polygamy argued as a solution to that problem. It is conceivable that under certain conditions polygamy or polyandry might be a workably happy arrangement. In Bikom and elsewhere it has not proven so, and the interested reader of Mrs. Reyher's delightful book will learn the reason why.

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