

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and
Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1941.

Not Quite the Missing Link

"HOW would you like to see a true anthropological marvel, something that no scientist, no explorer has ever seen, except myself?" This question was put to Mr. Nicol Smith, in Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana, by a German doctor who appeared to spend his time collecting snakes. Mr. Smith, who had, he says in *Bush Master* (Gollancz, 16s.), met the doctor casually only a few hours before, was surprised at the next piece of information he received:—

"I have," said the doctor, "discovered a tribe of people, Indians who are so primitive that they live in trees, and who form a living link with the creatures that antedated man himself! No, these are not the missing link between man and the apes—these go back even further, into the countless millions of years! These are the link between man and reptile, reptile and bird—for, as you know, the fossil footprints of prehistoric creatures show that they were provided with three toes only. The living Indians I have found are three-fingered."

Mr. Smith was Sceptical

Mr. Smith was frankly sceptical, but the doctor proceeded to show him photographs of a three-fingered Indian, and later produced samples of radium-bearing rock, from "a field" he discovered, and of whose existence no one else dreams!

Having a taste for adventure, and being temporarily at a loose end, Mr. Smith agreed to accompany the doctor on an expedition in search of this odd tribe, and of the radium. Mr. Smith was, naturally, to contribute something

towards the expenses of the expedition, but he was also to have the honour of announcing to the world the discovery of the lost tribe.

Abortive Expedition

Actually, the expedition got no farther than Washabo, on the



The Corentijn River, near Washabo, from *Bush Master* (Gollancz).

Corentijn river. Here the doctor set about hunting for snakes, and Mr. Smith was left to his own devices. The Indians were friendly, and he was lucky to find one, known as the Teacher, who spoke excellent English and was so able to act as interpreter. One day there arrived an Indian

whom Mr. Smith had not previously seen. He was introduced as Paulus, and suddenly Mr. Smith realized that on his left hand he had only three fingers:—

"At the sight of that strange, bird-like claw, I felt a thrill of incredulous excitement rush through me. For a moment I gaped at it, speechless, and then a thousand questions sprang to my lips. 'Why! Why!' I stammered. 'You are one of the three-fingered Indians!' Paulus looked at me blankly. 'Have you travelled far?' I exclaimed before

fingers! Paulus admitted that, on a previous visit to Washabo, the doctor had photographed him several times. The doctor was a fraud, there was no "missing link" tribe, and gradually Mr. Smith learnt the full extent of his fraudulent activities. He was in fact an active Fifth Columnist, engaged in stirring up discontent in the penal colony in French Guiana, and among the natives of Dutch Guiana.

"Merciless Criminals"

Later, when discussing the doctor with a business man in Paramaribo, Mr. Smith remarked that he did not see what use the French convicts could ever be to Germany. To this his friend replied:—

"If ever Germany should seek to establish a foothold in America, he who controlled the convicts of French Guiana would control the greatest band of merciless criminals ever gathered together—a force of from ten to fifteen thousand cut-throats and murderers. How could we here in Dutch Guiana stand up against them for one moment? Our whole colonial force numbers less than three hundred men. They would sweep over us in a single night."

Seeing Queer Things

In spite of some disappointments, Mr. Smith's trip did not lack excitement. He met odd characters, learnt a good deal about voodoo, saw queer birds, animals, snakes and fishes, including a vampire bat in the act of sucking a child's blood, and an army of giant hunter ants, marching in a column between thirty and forty feet wide. Finally, he was inducted with due ceremony into the tribe of Arawak Indians—all of which goes to make *Bush Master* entertaining reading.

Country Matters

By H. E. BATES

OVER to Candleford (Oxford University Press, 8s. 6d.) is reminiscence in water-colour. Miss Flora Thompson, in this gentle autobiography of her childhood in the 'eighties, adds nothing to our knowledge of life. She has no new colours; she makes no plea for a revolution. Her book has exactly the charm and quality of a good amateur water-colour. Faithfully, tenderly, with a warm heart, a keen eye and an occasional touch of humour, it reflects a way of country life that is gone.

Things past

You could excuse Miss Thompson if she grew sentimental over this world of the peaceful village green, the post-mistress, the old sun-bonneted women, the smocked farm-labourers, a world in which "Christmas, the Harvest Home and the Village Feast were the only holidays," and in which the most shattering events were the penny-farthing bicycle that sometimes knocked over and killed people, a day excursion in a horse and trap, or the new telegraph instrument that was kept at the post office under a velvet cover like a tea-cosy. But she never does. Throughout the book her detachment is admirable, her picture clear and serene and remembered objectively: a picture that will delight an older generation by its intimate accuracy, but will interest a younger as a

glimpse into what was indeed the end of an age.

The *Fall of the Year* (Chapman and Hall, 6s.), is, I take it, a symbolic title. Looking out on the countryside from a museum of obsolete implements, Mr. H. W. Massingham sees it in a bad state of repair. Nothing is as it used to be in those stirring days when Plough Monday was an orgy of revelry and the Harvest Supper was the grand finale of the year and when everybody was well fed, boisterous, and satisfied, enjoying "a happy life, serene, smiling, exuberant, fulfilled."

The forces that have changed this enchanting form of rural life—which I need hardly say exists entirely in Mr. Massingham's imagination—are the town, scientific progress, the plutocrats of the City of London, the modern craving for jazz, pleasure and mechanization, and the urban blackguards (these seem to include most of us) who seek to urbanize the countryside, educate our children in town schools, and generally impair the foundations of rural life.

Remodelled on the past

Mr. Massingham, who reads history when it suits him and ignores it when it doesn't, urges us to remodel country life on the pattern of the past, apparently going back if necessary to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the days of oxen teams, primitive

he had a chance to speak. "Is your country a long way from here? How long does it take to get there?"

Paulus still looked puzzled, and then the Teacher explained that Paulus was the brother of their own chief, who just happened to have been born with three

these and similar speculative and rather petulant statements is based Mr. Massingham's argument in favour of a new deal for agriculture in particular and for rural life in general.

Extraordinary descriptions

The book is filled out with some rather extraordinary descriptions of nature. Mr. Massingham writes at times like an intoning churchwarden, and his style is a glamorous, washy mess: "A transformation scene of such polychrome pomp takes place that it seems as though winter-death were a bride which the workaday green earth goes to meet like a groom in silks and fine array." He talks about "the plebeian bramble"; autumn is a "tawdry gipsy maid"; he introduces us to the "tergiversation" of the English climate. He is sometimes sublimely funny—"is there anything more mysterious on earth," he asks, "than a compost heap?" He writes peevishly and prettily and rather parsonically about the weather, the seasons, the trees, the flowers, the birds, and above all about the old, the obsolete and the dead.

Altogether, indeed, his book supplies a very good example first of how not to write English, second of how not to write about the countryside. Using a painful brand of sentimentalism to decorate and soften an equally painful brand of dictatorial argument, Mr. Massingham manages, in fact, to produce practically the most irritating book on the countryside I ever read.

Asking questions

When we read that "we have driven them (peasantry) off the land" it is time to ask questions. What peasantry? And who are "we"? There has been no peasant class in England since it was driven from the land in the second great period of enclosure at the turn of the eighteenth century; and whoever was responsible for that revolution it is not "we." Again: "for the past eighty years, and more so than at present, we have treated the soil as dirt." Once more, who are "we"? and why in particular has soil been dirt since 1860? On