



SYNTHETIC SHELLBIRD

Concocted out of fossil shells as a caricature of a well known geologist, this fantastic fowl was named in honor of its victim, *Heterogenus lawsoni*, anon.

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in a hunt for dinosaurs in South America, or ice worms in Alaska, will bring a response, sometimes sufficient to enable a doughty warrior to drink himself into a happy stupor, in which he can dream about the strange animals without leaving the safety of his favorite bar.

Tall stories, perhaps, serve a definite need in our present life. Man has always wanted something to wonder at, or to laugh at, and the tall tale satisfies both needs. While most tall tales are told with tongue in cheek, and accepted with a grain or two of salt (taken atop a teaspoonful of the same), there is another group of stories, just as untrue, but sincerely believed by the teller. Under certain conditions, human brains get a trifle out of order. Insanity is not included in this—it is a semi-permanent disorder. When a man is extremely hungry, thirsty, tired, cold, or drunk, his perceptions get a trifle out of order, and he is given to “seeing things” that are not there, in exactly the same manner as a fever patient has hallucinations. Many of these dreams brought on by abnormal hardship seem very real, and are often believed by the recounter, even if by nobody else. When a man collects too many of these unforgettable dreams of things that never happened outside of his own mind, he is locally reputed to be “bushed.” Perhaps Jim Bridger’s

famous tale of the petrified forest in Yellowstone Park, inhabited by petrified birds, who sang petrified songs, had its origin in too much solitude and hardship. Many famous stories have undoubtedly been inspired by the effects of fever or solitude, or hunger.

Some of the wild tales told by travelers are based on some mistaken observation of an actual thing. For example, the legendary mermaid of the South Seas may well have had its origin in a poor observation of a dugong, or sea-cow. To a poor observer a sea-cow might look like a mermaid, particularly if the observer wanted to believe that it was a mermaid.

Somehow, the stories told by the best masters of fiction cannot compare with those found in isolated mining camps and heard from half-crazy miners or prospectors, whose brains have been a trifle addled by long years of hardship and solitude, and then stimulated by liquor. Usually, however, the “bushed” miner has only one story, which he tells over and over, while the composer of fiction has to think up a new one each week.

When the stories of Atlantis cease to attract, someone invents a continent of Mu. And when Mu is thoroughly discredited, another mythical land, inhabited by nonexistent beings, is conjured up by the imaginative, the misinformed, and the mentally-out-of-order, for the

edification of the credulous. Somehow, an apocryphal tale is more attractive than the truth and hunting for buried treasure is more attractive than digging in a mine, even though the mine may pay \$3 a day regularly, and the buried treasure does not exist.

Guides keep a repertory of tales to tell the annual crop of palefaces. Despite our high degree of general education, some “flatland” woman can always be persuaded to carry her camera open and ready all day, so that she can get a picture of the rackabore to send back home, and each year another tourist is persuaded to sleep in the hotel in a high-country town because of the very dangerous effects of mountain dew.

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PLANT PHYSIOLOGY

Neutron Bombardment Produces Abnormal Growths

BOMBARDMENT of seeds with fast neutrons from a cyclotron produces abnormalities in the leaves and other parts after they sprout, reports Roy Milton Chatters of the University of Michigan. (*Science*, Mar. 18) In some of the leaves one whole side would be missing, in others, normally entire leaves would be deeply lobed, each lobe with a distinct midvein. The cotyledons or seed-leaves were sometimes cleft, and they were usually sprinkled with minute white dots.

The seeds, which included those of evening primrose, cactus, snapdragon and one or two other genera, were exposed alongside the “tank” of the cyclotron, suitably shielded, for periods of from one to nine weeks. Some of them had their germinating capacity considerably reduced, but others showed as high germinating powers after prolonged exposure as they did before.

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