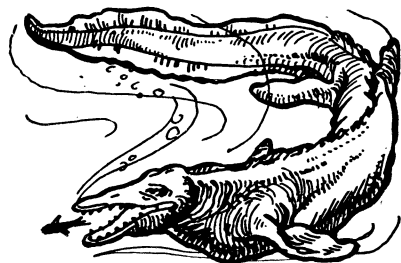


SCIOLOGY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

by Frank Thone



Superstition, Science's Jackal

SUPERSTITION always shows a curious parasitic dependence on science, supposed to be its bitterest arch-enemy.

The current "silly season" of sea serpent stories affords an excellent case in point. The things which people have seen, or think they have seen, in Loch Ness, Puget Sound and other places, have been very commonly given the shapes, in their more or less excited descriptions, of the swimming saurians that dominated the seas of the Mesozoic era, which was the Middle Age of geology. Men still call the apparitions sea serpents, but they picture them as ichthyosaurs.

Before the rise of paleontology as a well-organized science, and especially before its popularization by such fascinating imaginative romancers as H. G. Wells, the strange wonders seen by them that go down to the sea in ships most often took the form of monstrous snakes. This was natural enough. Serpents were locally known as objects of fear, and there was good Scriptural warrant for regarding them as endowed with even supernatural powers of evil. Added thereto were the meager and hence often exaggerated descriptions that drifted back into Europe, of the huge constrictor-snakes of the tropics, seen by a few hardy travellers, or perhaps only described to them by tellers of tall tales in the bazaars who saw a chance to pull a greenhorn's leg.

Ancient superstition and modern superstition were thus alike, in that they fed on the best natural knowledge available at the time.

But it is not only in natural history that superstition has persistently dogged the heels of science, parasitically living on decayed scraps of more authentic knowledge. There is hardly a

field of science that does not have its left-handed image in the looking-glass world of superstition.

Anatomy had hardly got itself thoroughly established in modern times when phrenology fastened itself on the human skull, like a leech with an appetite for bone instead of blood. Phrenology has seen its best days; it is still practiced in the shabbier quarters of our cities along with palmistry and other cheap necromancies. Its vogue as a really fashionable superstition (and therefore as a racket fat in cash returns) has long since been hauled to the boneyard. Yet fragments of it persist, even at that, ranging from "character reading" from faces to the determination of political pogroms against people with "wrong" skull shapes.

Again, though early astronomers shamelessly practiced astrology, and some of them probably believed in it, the divorce between them has long since been complete, at least on the part of science. But astrologers were quick to seize on the discovery of the planet Pluto a few years ago; and there is a regular nest of astrologers' "studios" in Chicago, as near as they can get to the Adler Planetarium.

Thus is the lion of Science never without its following jackal of Superstition. The lion may at times turn and roar at the jackal, but he never gets rid of him.

Science News Letter, March 10, 1934

ORNITHOLOGY

Ambitious Woodpeckers Disrupt Electric Service

WOODPECKERS have long been notorious for drumming and drilling away at objects of no possible profit to them—tin roofs, for example—for no apparent reason other than sheer pride of artistry. But a South Carolina power company sends in a woodpecker story that tops them all.

The company had been using a type of outdoor cutout fuse installation in which the soft fuse wire was partly exposed. More of these cutouts were opening than it was reasonable to expect, but no solution to the mystery was forthcoming until one day one of the engineers happened to see a woodpecker at work on one of the soft-wire fuses. The company promptly substituted a fuse in which the exposed part was of copper, too tough for the birds' beaks. That put an end to the trouble.

Science News Letter, March 10, 1934

GENERAL SCIENCE

Science Seen as Aiding Totality of Human Advance

SCIENCE, under controversy in many quarters as a prime contributor to the present disturbed condition of the world, was pointed out as a possible and even necessary contributor to world recovery and further progress, by Dr. John C. Merriam, president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, who addressed at Philadelphia the American Philosophical Society, America's oldest scientific organization. Like the long-discussed conflict of science and religion, the assumed clash between natural science and social science is possible only when there is interference with normal exchange of ideas, Dr. Merriam declared.

Much of Dr. Merriam's address was concerned with the problems of conservation, and the ways in which science can come to the aid of economic reconstruction and sound long-time planning for future generations. Natural resources of the irreplaceable type, like oil and minerals, hitherto recklessly and wastefully exploited as they have been discovered, largely by chance, can be much more wisely administered if the extent and availability of their deposits are mapped out by scientific surveys, and if science is further invoked in working out methods for their most efficient use. Resources that renew themselves in humanly measurable time, like timber and game animals, are even more susceptible to scientific management.

But conservation can serve more than man's bread-needs alone. Dr. Merriam pointed out the possible services of science in the preservation or restoration of natural areas fitted for esthetic enjoyment, educational development, and even religious contempla- (*Turn page*)

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