

The Origin of the World

By R. McMillan.

CURIOUS FACTS.

CHAPTER XX

THE things you read out of a book are not half so interesting as the things you see for yourself, and all book-reading is intended to sharpen your powers of observation. If you do not think and observe for yourself, you will be very little better for all the books you read. In fact, I have known people to read themselves stupid. I feel I would like to tell you some of the things I have seen myself, and, while they may not be as clever as the things I have read in books, I am sure they will interest you quite as much.

When I was about eighteen or nineteen years of age I was living in a little town in Peru, named Tumbes, and I used to spend a good deal of time on the banks of the river watching the alligators and the iguanas, and wondering about things in general. I knew nothing at all about natural history, so of course I learned very little; but all the same I acquired quite a lot of knowledge, unconsciously. I saw that the lizards liked the banks of the river, but they never went into the water; and I remembered the snakes in Manila, in the Philippine Islands, which had taken to the water. We used to catch the snakes in Manila when we were fishing, and very disagreeable things they were till you got accustomed to them.

These gorgeously-coloured "goanas" on the Tumbes River liked to live near the water, but they never went into it. It seemed to me then that the lower forms of life, like frogs, snakes, and iguanas, could take to the water very easily, and become either land or water animals, as necessity arose. But that was only a vague notion. I did not really think it out, but the idea was there.

About 500 miles from Tumbes, away out in the Pacific Ocean, right on the equator, there is a group of islands called the Galapagos Islands. They are nearly all volcanic, and they are set in the deep, deep sea. If I had understood the laws of nature then, I could have learned such a lot; but I did not know anything about science, so I missed my opportunity. I knew the islands were made of lava, because they were mostly hard and black, or dark brown, and the "soil" cut our boots to pieces. There were no mammals on the islands, no warm-blooded animals that suckled their young (that is what mammals are), but there were plenty of birds and tortoises, and the sea was swarming with fish and big, hungry sharks.

I had no idea of asking why there were no warm-blooded animals on the islands. You see, I had no idea of the way the world had grown, and if you had asked me then as to the origin of the world I would have told you the wrong thing, and been quite sure that I was right. But now I know how the world really originated, and I realize the vast mystery of it all and its incomprehensibility, and I never laugh at anybody's ignorance. I know my own! I had not, in those days, read even Tennyson who tells the story in *The Princess*. He says:—

This world was once a fluid haze of light,
Till toward the centre set the starry tides,
And eddied into suns, that wheeling cast
The planets: then the monster, then the man;
Tattoo'd or woaded, winted-clad in skins,
Raw from the prime, and crushing down his mate;
As yet we find in barbarous isles, and here
Among the lowest.

You see that is just the story I have been trying to tell you, and if I had read Tennyson then I might have known enough to ask questions about the Galapagos Islands. But I had no knowledge at all, so I was dumb before the mystery of the volcanic islands, the fierce tides, the rugged hills, and the

strange living things thereon. It was only when I read Darwin's books, years and years after, that the veil fell from my eyes, and I saw the miracle of the lonely oceanic islands.

There were iguanas on the shores of all the islands; but they were not the bright-coloured, swift-moving things that lived on the banks of the Tumbes River. They were big, black, horrid-looking things that made you shudder to look at, and they were very sluggish—on the land. They were absolutely helpless, and seemed to have no idea of either fighting or running away. I had chased the "goanas" in Peru; but they were too swift for me, and now I could lay hold of these horrid ones, by the tail, and they would scarcely struggle. If you stood on the edge of a cliff and threw one into the sea, it appeared to wake up, and would swim as fast as lightning to the shore, and come right back to your feet and let you throw it in again. Why? Mr. Darwin told me! These iguanas came from the mainland, ages ago, on the roots of floating trees. The tough, leathery eggs of the iguanas stood the trip, and were cast on to these rough, volcanic shores. Then the little iguanas found nothing to eat, and they were very hungry. The only green thing about was the green laver, a sort of sea-lettuce, in the salt water; so the poor little beggars had to eat that. And they lived—at least, some of them did—and their children learned to like the green laver (if they did not, they died); and so through the ages the family learned to go deeper and deeper for the laver; and they learned to swim very fast, for the sharks came and caught them, and ate them up if they were not pretty quick at getting ashore.

All the slow iguanas were eaten up by the sharks, especially the coloured ones; so colours went out of fashion, and the only iguanas that survived were the sombre-skinned ones, and the ones that could swim fast. The only danger that was recognized by the "goana" was the shark; for its poor little brain could contain no other idea, and that meant getting ashore as quickly as possible. When man came and flung it into the water, its little brain was too sluggish to understand that men were worse than sharks. So, as soon as it struck the water, it came right back to the shore, where the man was, thinking it was safe on the rocks.

Do you observe now how the law was working out? The iguanas loved life—as we all do—and, in the struggle for existence, the only ones that survived were the ones that adapted themselves to the new conditions. That is to say, the survivors were the ones that had varied in a direction that was favourable to continued existence. The coloured ones—such as I used to admire in Peru—were soon eaten up; therefore the coloured variety soon died out. Then the slow swimmers died out, and the only ones that lived were the dark-coloured ones and the swift ones. They were the ones that brought forth young, which inherited the parental tricks and appearance; so that in the struggle for existence, on the Galapagos Islands, the survivors were the ones best fitted for the new conditions.

It was not through any cleverness on the part of the iguanas themselves, but just owing to the operation of very simple laws. The laws of Nature are simple in the extreme; but we will keep on thinking that they are complicated. They are no such thing. The entire world originated in response to those simple laws, and is kept on its course by them, and we are what we are by their operation.

I hope you see what I mean, and how things work? If you do, and care to study the matter carefully, read good books, and keep your eyes open and your mind alert, you will come to understand the origin of the world.

The Galapagos Islands were furnished from the mainland of South America by drifting timber, carrying the eggs and seeds of living things which found a resting place on the volcanic islets, and

found means to live there. But the change was very great from the mainland to the islands, so the living things that survived had to adapt themselves to the new conditions, just as the iguanas did. Thus it has come to pass that nearly all the island life—birds and tortoises, turtles and insects, snails and trees—are different from those on the mainland. But not much different. They are all South American, with a difference. They have varied a little, owing to the changed conditions of life on the islands; but they are the same sort as they have in America, only different. You see what I mean, do you not?

There are differences, also, between the forms of life on the various islands, because the water separating the islands is of oceanic depth. It forms a barrier between island and island, except to the fishes, which appeared to me to be the same all round the islands. The abysmal depths of the ocean, and the fierce tides which sweep between the islands, have made the forms of life on them vary in each place. Taking them full and large, the Galapagos Islands are the best examples I know of the law of development and variation. But you will see the same kind of thing wherever you go, and as clearly in Australia as in the Galapagos Islands.

We had no rabbits here (*) till somebody brought them from England. Why were there no rabbits here? Because they did not develop in this continent. But as soon as ever they were let loose here they developed into a pest that threatened, at one time, to ruin the pastoral and farming industries. We have spent millions of money in fighting them, and I am not sure that we have got them down now. If you think out the rabbit problem and the briar question, and the prickly pear and the Bathurst burr, and a lot of these things, you will see that my story of the origin of the world is necessarily true.

Next Lesson: EARLY MEN.

(*) The book was written in Australia.—(Ed.)

Obituary

COMRADE James A. Teit died at Merritt, B. C., on Oct. 30th, of cancer, a disease which had been undermining his constitution vigorously, particularly of late years. His death is a loss directly, not alone to the Socialist movement specifically, but to the world of investigation in natural history and racial development, and cultural advancement generally. He had lived in British Columbia about 40 years, landing on this coast from a sailing vessel which had brought him from the Shetland Islands, where he was born.

Since the inception of the S. P. of C. he had been actively associated with its work, especially those branches of it which, in the educational field, bordered on the investigation of primitive forms of society, in the written work of past stages or in the records of present researches in tribal forms and kinship, customs, ceremonies, folk-lore, etc, in which field of enquiry he had accomplished much among the various tribes of Indians on the coast and the inner and upper country of B. C. He was known among the Indians everywhere from the U. S. boundary to the Stikine country and, possessing the "language faculty", he spoke over twenty tribal dialects, besides Norwegian, Danish and French.

His researches, unfortunately, have been cut off, but we hope the collected records of his unfinished work will be preserved. His "The Thompson Indians of British Columbia," (1900) and "The Shuswap" (1909), both published by the American Museum of Natural History, have proved to be useful contributions to anthropology. The reader of this note is referred to "Primitive Society," by Robert H. Lowie, (1920. Boni and Liveright). In this work, and in "Culture and Ethnology", Mr. Lowie is critical of some of the conclusions of Lewis H. Morgan's "Ancient Society," a work which has served somewhat as an anthropological text book for many years in Socialist study circles. The work of comrade Teit, brought to the use of this investigator, proves itself invaluable, coming as it does from the field of practical research and and personal association, and tends somewhat to modify that critical treatment which, in any case, is essential although not necessarily altogether tenable, as a present day treatment upon a work written in the day when a certain dogmatic attitude was allowable, induced as no doubt it was, by the then prevailing "fixity" ideas of orthodoxy.

We conclude our obituary note with the record of that keen sense of loss in the comradeship of association in our common cause which is the feature attending the passing out of any comrade. In addition, we extend our earnest sympathies to Comrade Teit's wife and children.