

Origin of life : curious letters to Prof. Schäfer, amusing protests : speech at the Author's Club.

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THE STAVE

ORIGIN



Some amusing extracts from
received by him from people
the newspapers of his time and
the origin of life as presented
which were read by Professor
dinner in the New Year
held in the club of White
Dr Edward Huxley, in
lecture, and proposing the
said. We have the privilege
honour as the guest of the
the British Association for
science for the present year
very year as president of it
a what may be called some
of science. The public will
because the records are ex
selected distinction in the
which he has devoted him
ness I have seen a large
British Association, and in
eye of my mind a glorious
world under which I have
seen. I shall only repeat
these.

There is, for instance,
Dutton, whose name is
known to you. There is
Dutton, the lecturer, and
the scientific benefactor of
other 27 were widely con
I have named, and I say this
revelation and with great
that who is our guest to
the honour to entertain the
say in the great University
and a matter for discus
tion. We are to have an
lecture on a subject which
most of which I venture
of the deepest interest
cannot fail to be something
new, and in such a lecture
it will be an illuminating

ORIGIN OF LIFE.

CURIOUS LETTERS TO
 PROF. SCHÄFER.

AMUSING PROTESTS.

SPEECH AT THE AUTHORS'
 CLUB.

Some amusing extracts from correspondence received by him from people in all parts of the world in consequence of his famous speech at Dundee on the origin of life as president of the British Association were read by Professor Schäfer at the first dinner in the New Year of the Authors' Club, held in the club, 2, Whitehall-court, last night.

Sir Edward Brabrook, in introducing Professor Schäfer, and proposing the toast of his health, said: We have the privilege to-night of entertaining as the guest of the club the president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science for the present year. To be elected in any year as president of the British Association is what may be called something of a blue riband of science. The person who is elected is elected because the council are convinced that he has achieved distinction in the branch of science to which he has devoted himself. For 40 years or more I have been a humble member of the British Association, and there passes before the eye of my mind a glorious procession of presidents under which I have had the honour to serve. I shall only mention two or three of them.

There is, for instance, the late Sir George Darwin, whose recent loss we have so much reason to deplore. There is his brother, Francis Darwin, the botanist, and there was Lord Lister, the scientific benefactor of mankind. All the other 37 were worthy companions of those men I have named, and I say that without a moment's hesitation and with great force in respect of our friend who is our guest to-night. That we have the honour to entertain the Professor of Physiology in the great University of Edinburgh is in itself a matter for distinction and congratulation. We are to have an address by Professor Schäfer on a subject which he has not disclosed, but which I venture to say will be a subject of the deepest interest to all of us. It cannot fail to be something which is a revelation, told in such forcible and clear language as to be also illuminating (applause).

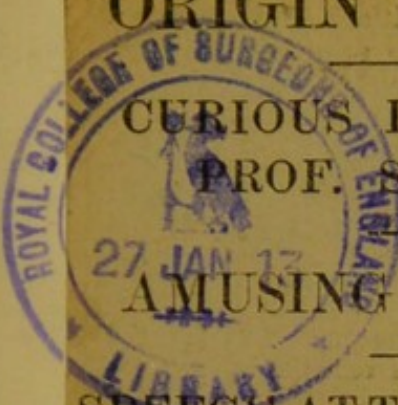
WHAT THE WORLD THOUGHT.

"I am afraid that the difficulty of the topic is so great," said Professor Schäfer, "that at the present moment I scarcely know what name I shall give it. I should like to say that they are desultory remarks. But if there is to be a serious topic to-night I would suggest that it be called the ignorance of the world in general regarding what the rest of the world is doing (laughter). That was very strongly borne in upon me from the fact that the address which I had prepared for the British Association, and which in the words of a newspaper critic was full of matter which everybody who knew anything about the subject was familiar with, and otherwise was extremely dull and full of platitude—I say great was my astonishment to learn that this had set Fleet-street on fire. I think that it exemplifies the fact that the world knows very little of what is going on in it. Because the subject of my address and the manner in which it was treated was a subject and a manner familiar to biologists in general. There are very few modern biologists who seriously differ from the general trend of that address. But the world in general appeared to think that this was entirely a new idea. Yet the only new thing in it was that the whole trend of observation and experiment was in the same direction for a number of years, so that what some 30 years ago seemed probable to men like Huxley and Tyndall seems now within the range of speedy possibility. I am referring to the origin of life.

"I take it," proceeded Dr. Schäfer, "that you of the Authors' Club entertain authors at your banquets. I never, by any stretch of the imagination, imagined myself an author. I have certainly made books, but every bookmaker is hardly an author (laughter). The present company excepted, I should be prepared to say that the number of authors in this country is very limited. Although various persons who have corresponded with me and who have written in the newspapers seem to think that I may be the author of existence—(laughter)—yet I must say that a much larger number are prepared to assume I am the author of all evil (more laughter.)"

"MY POOR BLIND BROTHER."

"I have had many communications, beginning something like this:—"My poor blind brother" (laughter), which have invariably ended in consigning me to the bottomless pit (loud laughter). In that respect I must say that I plead guilty to being here under false pretences. I do not claim to be the author of existence. At the same time, I am bound to say that I have a certain claim upon your hospitality, because I have been the means of authorship in other people. This has been strikingly exemplified in the numerous letters and articles produced, beginning in Fleet-street and going away to Japan and New Zealand—they cannot get any further as yet—and they are still being produced. In addition, I have had a vast amount of private correspondence, which, if I had been disposed to reply to it, would have made me engage a whole office staff, and I should certainly not have been here



to-night. I don't think it is fair that I should keep these communications altogether to myself.

AN EXTRAORDINARY EFFUSION.

For example, I had sent to me from America a copy of a tablet which "God handed to Noah" (laughter). It is an extremely interesting inscription, and runs:—

Have ditches dug from ocean into every burning and boiling place, and into every abandoned burning coal mine, and allow all bodies to float away. Drown all birds, hens, snakes, camels, llamas, all drown, and allow all bodies to float away on ocean. Never eat meat. Drown all people, old and young, allow all bodies to float away on the ocean, never teach or preach, never have any houses or cities. Flood inside all volcanoes. Use submarine boats for deep-sea diving bells. Dig ditches from bottom of the ocean.

"I think those instructions would have been useful to Noah," commented Dr. Schäfer. "Another communication is from a gentleman who tells me that the millennium is coming (laughter). He says the wealthy and learned will be cast off. So, gentlemen, there is not much chance for some of you (laughter). Writers and talkers will be rejected, he adds. Then I have a lady correspondent who rejoices in the name of Lyons; she hails from Jamaica, and is probably a coloured lady. She is not satisfied with prose, she breaks into verse, and she entitles her poem, 'Male and Female, the Origin of he and she.'" The professor read the verses and said (amid laughter) that he thought there was nothing, outside some extracts from Browning, to beat it.

OTHER CURIOSITIES.

"Then I have been asked by many to explain the Book of Genesis," added the speaker. "Well, I don't intend to attempt that with Archdeacon Sinclair in the audience. Another gentleman wrote to me to say that the two most gifted men in the world have never spoken to one another. He suggested a visit (laughter). Yet another gentleman sends me a pamphlet, in which he summarises his conclusions in the following manner:—'Alcohol is the life-giving power. And a glass of beer is the solution of life, or life in solution.' He says: 'You may know that because the Romans called brandy—I don't know whether they had brandy—aqua vitæ' (laughter). Amongst other curiosities in my correspondence was a prayer I was desired to hand on without breaking the chain, so that it should go round the world. Then I had various communications from people who thought that they had discovered the mode and origin of life, and they thought 'it might interest me.'"

Continuing, Professor Schäfer said that he received a great many letters from people who thought he had a recipe for perpetuating life. If he had that recipe they were not the sort of people to whom he would hand it (laughter). His correspondence was in many languages—English, German, Italian, but not French—and he thought the French were rather more level-minded. One of his correspondents said that he made an experiment 60 years ago. He pulled a hair out of a horse's tail, placed it in the mud, and examined

it from time to time, and in course of time found it begin to move and wriggle. In the writer's opinion it had become converted into an eel, and he wrote to ask the speaker if he agreed with this (laughter). We were singularly ignorant of what other people were doing in the world, in spite of the immense progress of journalism and in magazine writing, where we get a sort of mixed information in regard to the progress made in different branches of learning and science. In spite of that there was extreme ignorance in regard to subjects upon which work was being done every day.

BELIEF IN EVOLUTION.

It seemed to him extraordinary, said Professor Schäfer, that there should be any persons who did not believe in evolution and evolutionary doctrine—the backbone of modern biology and all science generally. Without the doctrine of evolution the whole of geological science would melt away and be absolutely without any foundation. Every master in every other science would be prepared to say the same, all of whom were absolutely dependent upon the doctrine of evolution which was the same biological doctrine, although it came into prominence in the middle of the last century when Darwin published that magnificent series of researches, and that grand old Wallace (applause) published simultaneously his conclusions which agreed in so striking a manner with the conclusions Darwin had formed years before as the result of a lifelong series of experiments. It was remarkable that even educated people should not know that this was not a mere opinion, though nothing positive could be asserted. So far, however, as they could be positive of anything evolution did hold the field in science at the present day as it did in every branch of human knowledge.

The professor thanked them for the honour they had done him in entertaining him, a unique honour, for he had never for one moment thought that he would be worthy of being entertained at the Authors' Club.

Professor Alfred Caldecott said that it could not be denied that Professor Schäfer had in his recent message disturbed the coloured folk and the female portion of the population in particular. Undoubtedly we all lived in profound ignorance of what other people were thinking, and in his opinion it really wanted another sense to know what life was. It was just possible there were senses besides those of which we had actual knowledge which would give the idea of life. He did not find in the realm of science that the law of conservation held at all. When a child was born a new mentality came upon the scene, but had the mother lost any of her mentality? On the other hand, when it came to death, where did it disappear to? When Shakespeare retired, and his mentality declined, did anyone gain by it? What other part of the cosmos took it up?

Professor Starling, continuing the discussion, said that there was no such law as conservation in the scientific world. There was a law of change and a law of continuity. All that scientific investigators dealt with was energy,

which was not created or destroyed, and was purely objective where it touched life. Whether mentality was destroyed or created had nothing to do with science, and was purely a matter for psychologists. In his opinion psychology might come to be founded on physiological facts; indeed, they were just beginning to build up a physiology on central nervousness.

Dr. W. H. Stoddard differed from Professor Caldecott, and said that the child when born was not able to see. There was no mind in the child. The senses had to develop, and this only after certain processes had taken place in the nervous system.

Dr. Bernard Hollander thought that scientists were somewhat to blame for not putting popular versions of their researches before the world. He was astonished at the reasons given by some people who came to him. Recently a man called and asked to be taught the principles of hypnotism, in order that he might hypnotise the members of the Stock Exchange (laughter). They did not know what mind was, and all they could do was to observe the laws of mental phenomena. He did not agree with Dr. Stoddard that the child was born without any mentality at all (hear, hear). A child without any teaching would manifest certain emotions at particular periods of his life.

Professor Schäfer briefly replied to the discussion, and the health of the chairman was proposed by Dr. Percy Ames, who occupied the vice-chair in the absence of Mr. Charles Garvice through illness.

Among those present were Sir Steyning Edgerley, Sir John Brickwood, Professor W. E. Dixon, Fleet-Surgeon Marsh Beadnell, Colonel Mantell, Major Henry Alford, Major C. E. Beadnell, Major E. R. Wayland, Captain St. John Belbin, the Ven. Archdeacon Sinclair, the Rev. Canon W. C. Grane, Rev. Arthur Carr, Rev. L. St. Alban Wells, Dr. Bailey, Dr. W. Briggs, Dr. Aitken Barclay, Dr. E. E. Deane, Dr. Herbert French, Dr. H. Menzies, Dr. Hubert Norman, Dr. T. W. Parkinson, Dr. A. F. Tredgold, Dr. Ivor Tuckett, Dr. G. W. Thompson, Messrs. Arthur Andrews, Archibald Allen, A. L. Armstrong, A. Bruce-Joy, Haydn Brown, Percy J. Brebner, R. W. Brant, John Briggs, Arthur Brown, R. Henderson Bland, A. L. Barron, F. W. Coldrey, E. Wake Cook, H. V. Dorey, H. J. Forman, E. R. Garnsey, David Graham, F. L. A. Gibbs, E. Grossman, Kenneth Gibbs, J. Stuart Hay, Henry Hill, D. E. Hutchins, Henry A. Hering, Arnold Haultain, Roland Hill, Dalziel Hall, Felix Leigh, E. P. Larken, H. B. Montgomery, C. R. Pears, G. W. D. Preston, R. A. Pinks, Hyde Parker, E. Parker, Simon Rachmilewitsch, Guy Rawlence, E. Raymond (Sydney, New South Wales), G. E. M. Skues, Clarence Seyler, George F. Shee, H. W. Shepheard-Walwyn, Herman Scheffauer, Charles E. Shea, J. Stanton, Ernest Short, E. T. Watkin, A. Worsley, W. A. Wayland, Rathmell Wilson, W. W. Wells, and Algernon Rose (hon. secretary).



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