

MUSEUM WORKERS IN ROLE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

By MARGARET J. BAUER

ONE of the little-known phases of the work of a museum is to supply information. The Museum's storehouse of knowledge and its technical staff are at the disposal of the general public as well as scholars. Authors and publishers often turn to the Museum for verification of facts, artists for ideas, and business men use the resources of

ability of the scientist to solve his problem, the Museum scientist will do a great amount of sleuthing to find the answer for more obscure or difficult questions. Many times a seemingly easy and simple question is unanswerable. One inquiry, "Why does a rabbit's nose twitch?" stumped the experts. While there are many theories and much speculation, no one knows or has ever found the answer. Needless to say, the inquirer was surprised when no answer was forthcoming.

'DRY FROG' BRINGS FOG

Very commonly the question requires complete rephrasing to make sense. Sometimes the questions come in badly garbled. One classic example was a telegram sent in by a frantic crossword puzzle addict who wanted a five-letter word for a "dry frog on the upper Nile, beginning with the letter 'q'." It was given to the Curator of Reptiles to answer. He had never heard of a dry frog, especially on the upper Nile. He searched through the literature but found nothing. Painstakingly he began a systematic search through the q's in the dictionary. At last he found the word. It was *qobar* and it meant a dry fog on the upper Nile. In transcribing the mes-

sage someone had written *frog* for fog. The crossword puzzle fan received the correct answer by return wire—collect.

Several years ago, one of the newspaper fads of the day was to run a series of prize-winning crossword puzzles. One part of the game was to decipher several small badly drawn pictures of objects, usually animals.

'BIG EARS, BUSHY TAIL . . .'

Inquiries poured into the Museum, usually in the following vein:

"Hello! Can you help me? I have an animal. It has four feet, big ears, bushy tail, and is climbing a branch. What is it?"

At first the Museum workers wondered what strange form of animal life had invaded the city, but soon they caught on when the inquirers insisted that "the name must be

six letters long and begin with an 'a.'" People were always startled when one could not give the answer right off. (The animal was an "aye aye," a Madagascan lemur.)

As the puzzles gained popularity, in self-defense the Museum workers tried to identify the animal pictures each day before the barrage of telephone calls started.

One day, when a particularly difficult what-animal-is-it picture arose, one of the researchers, as a last and desperate resource, paged through the index and picture section of an obsolete dictionary. To his joy he found the identical picture, a wood-cut, in the dictionary. The puzzle-makers had been using the pictures in this dictionary for their puzzle. After that the Museum worker was ready for his phone calls.

Upon occasion, more serious problems come in. Probably one of the most interesting and spectacular pieces of Museum detective work was done by Mr. Edmond Gueret, late Curator of Osteology.

'ELEMENTARY, WATSON!'

A detail from the police force came to the Museum and wished to see someone about bones. The two detectives were shown to Mr. Gueret's office. They showed him a tiny bone about a half-inch long and asked if he could tell them anything about it. Mr. Gueret saw that it was the joint of a little finger; that the epiphyses, or ends of the bone, were still soft, which meant a young person; and he judged the person to be a girl, because of the slenderness of the bone.

Mr. Gueret handed the bone back.

"What is it you want to know about this bone?" he asked.

"We found it in a furnace and we believe it might be the bone of someone we are looking for. Can you help us?"

"It is a joint of the little finger of a human being. She was a young girl about 18 years of age. Does that help?"

The detectives were astounded. How could he tell?

Mr. Gueret smiled and couldn't resist saying, "Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary!"

40,000 Beetles Received

The Museum recently acquired the larger part of the F. W. Nunnenmacher Collection of North American Coleoptera (beetles) including 40,000 specimens, representing 4,500 identified species, chiefly from the western United States. This acquisition was particularly desirable because the western species of this important group of insects had been rather poorly represented in the Museum's research collections. The latter now contain between one-half and two-thirds of the 25,000 species of beetles known to occur in North America.

Mr. Nunnenmacher was one of the best-known of the older coleopterists, and his was probably the only large general private collection of western beetles remaining.



Cartoon by Peggy Collings Brown

the Museum to solve practical problems of industry.

With the aid of references, and the technical knowledge of experts, many of the questions that come to the Museum can be answered without too much difficulty. Generally the questions are simple and often repeated, and need only the stock reply. In fact, should a Museum worker become so engrossed in his work as to be out of contact with the outer world (as specialist scholars are sometimes thought to be), the questions asked would tell him what season of the year it was. Invariably spring is announced in the Department of Zoology when someone calls in to ask, "How long does it take a robin's egg to hatch?"

Probably because of the peculiarly blind faith the layman seems to have in the



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