

# SCIENCE

NEW YORK, JUNE 17, 1892.

## INSECTS IN POPULAR DREAD IN NEW MEXICO.

BY C. H. TYLER TOWNSEND.

In the south-western portion of the United States there are many insects (using the term in its popular sense, and including Arachnida and Myriopoda) which are more or less striking in appearance. The Mexican element, which largely predominates, is wont to clothe many of these forms in superstition and fear. Some of them are more or less poisonous, while others are perfectly harmless. The malignant nature of the poisonous ones is, as a rule, greatly magnified. Space would forbid the detailing in this article of all the species which are held in dread by the Mexicans, and therefore only the most prominent ones will be noticed. It should also be mentioned that many Americans who have lived here for some length of time share to a large extent the fears of the Mexicans in this regard.

The centipedes (*Scolopendra sp.*) in southern New Mexico do not, as a rule, attain a length of more than four or five inches. Some are found at times which measure nearly six inches, but these are exceptional. They are often found in the adobe houses, the roofs of which are thatched and covered with earth. The summer rains disturb them, and they make their appearance inside. No one can be blamed for refusing to pick up a large centipede, yet they are not so dangerous as commonly supposed. As a general rule, a little ammonia applied to the stings will allay all irritation in a few hours, and no swelling will occur. With some persons the effects are more serious. At some future time a paper will be published by the writer, describing cases of bites and stings of this and other poisonous insects.

The whip-scorpion (*Thelyphonus sp.*) occurs here rather sparingly, but attains a good size. It is certainly a formidable looking beast when full grown. The Mexicans call it *viñagron*, and believe, so I am told, that its bite is sure death. A centipede is no comparison to it in the eyes of a Mexican, who would as soon face a rattlesnake or a Gila monster. I have been unable as yet to find anyone here who has been bitten by this insect, and the only specimens I have were brought to me dead. Some authors declare it to be harmless, while others assert the contrary. I believe, however, that a bite from the jaws is more or less poisonous. During a recent excavation in the city of El Paso, Texas, a gang of Mexican laborers was panic-stricken on the appearance, in the hole beside them, of a *viñagron* which had been disclosed by a stroke of the shovel.

The scorpion which occurs here is the smaller light-colored one (*Buthus sp.*), which does not attain a length of much more than two inches, and is usually smaller. It is dreaded by the Mexicans, but the sting is not more severe than that of a hornet, and often causes no swelling and but little irritation, which passes away in a short time.

One of the *Solpugidae* (probably *Datemes sp.*) occurs here. This family is closely related to the scorpions, and contains some very strange-looking forms. The species in

question attains a length of about one and three-quarters inches. The head consists very largely of two massive pairs of jaws, side by side, the two jaws of one pair working vertically on each other instead of horizontally. The pair on one side can work independently of that on the other, and this intensifies the strange appearance of the insect. These are held in great dread, and are doubtless in a certain degree poisonous.

The so-called tarantula (*Lycosa sp.*) comes next, and is undoubtedly the most venomous arthropod we have in this region. It is usually considered deadly. Its bite is attended with serious consequences, if we can believe reports which appear to be well authenticated. The largest specimen I have seen here measures two and one-half inches in the length of its body, which is as large as that of a half-grown mouse.

A huge unshapely cricket (*Stenopelmatus sp.*) is called *miño de la tierra* (child of the earth) by the Mexicans here, for the reason that it occurs in the ground and is supposed to resemble an infant in the form of its head and body. Its bite is believed to be fatal, and the writer once excited the admiration of all present by offering in public to handle all specimens that were brought him. The jaws are large and powerful, and doubtless can bite quite severely, but there is nothing of a poisonous nature connected with the bite. The Mexicans also have a superstition that the *Stenopelmatus* enters the uterus of pregnant females and causes monstrosities. Perhaps the dread of this cricket has arisen from the fact that in general appearance it greatly resembles the solpugid mentioned above.

The rear-horse (*Mantis sp.*) and walking-sticks (*Phasmidae*) appear to be confounded by the Mexicans, and "old-timers" as well, under the name of *campamoches*. It is one of the most firmly grounded ideas in the mind of the average New Mexico resident, that these insects, when accidentally swallowed by horses or cattle, are sure death to the swallower. No idea apparently could be more absurd, and none is harder to dissipate. I have been told repeatedly of cases where the animal was immediately cut open, and in no case did the operator fail to find a *campamoche* in the stomach. Such positive declarations would almost incline one to the belief that some poisonous properties were resident in the bodies of these insects.

Agricultural College, Las Cruces, New Mexico, June 5.

## SCIENTIFIC WORK IN CANADA, AT THE ELEVENTH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF CANADA, MAY 30 TO JUNE 2.

FIFTEEN papers were read by fellows of the Royal Society of Canada at its last meeting, just closed, in the Section (IV.) of Geology and Biology, and five more in the Department of Chemistry and Physical Sciences (Section III.).

Of the latter, Professor Chapman's paper "On a New Form of Application Goniometer" is of interest to geologists and mineralogists, as is also his additional note "On the Mexican Type in the Crystallization of the Topaz, with some Remarks on Crystallographic Notation."