

# A DATE WITH DESTINY

## OR, TWO WEEKS IN PHILADELPHIA

“I listened with rapt attention to the greatest conversationalist that ever graced the service of Paleontology. . . . New vistas of the life of the past opened before me. . . . I felt that I had stepped back into an ancient world.”

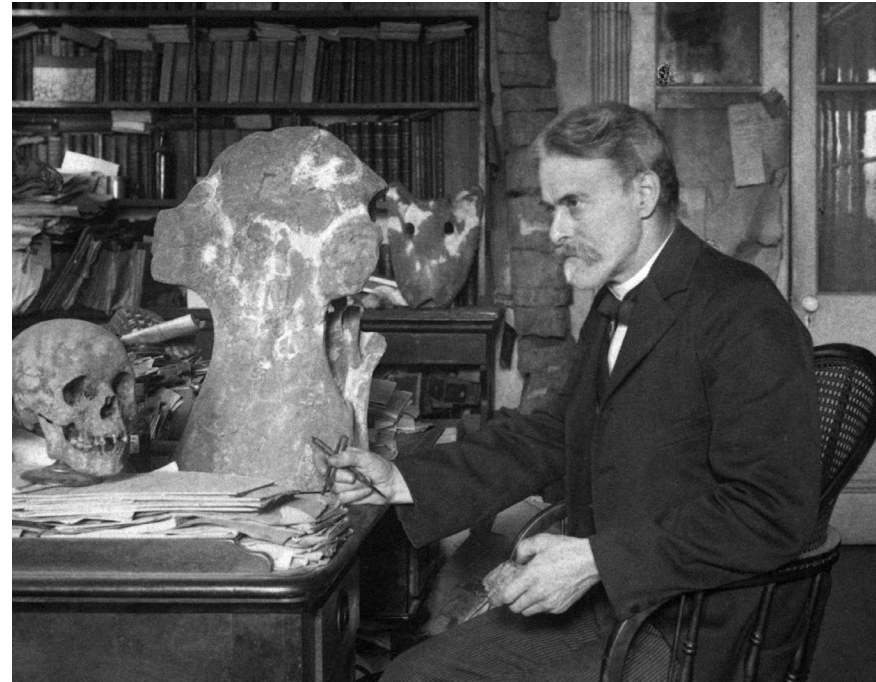
*Charles R. Knight, autobiography, 2005*

### COPE'S HOUSE OF MONSTERS

Cope's dwelling itself was commonplace enough. . . . Inside everything was unique and completely dust covered. Never have I seen such a curious place—just like the kind that Dickens would have loved. Piles of pamphlets rose from floor to ceiling in every narrow hallway, leaving just enough room to squeeze by them and no more. At the right as I entered, I looked into the front parlor. Shuttered with inside blinds, the floor was completely hidden by the massive bones of some vast creature, probably a dinosaur. Dust lay thick here as elsewhere, and the place was absolutely bare of furniture and hangings. No pictures, no curtains, nothing but the petrified skeletons of extinct monsters . . . disposed in every available open space. This in itself was peculiar but it merely introduced one to the strange sights to be encountered in this almost sinister domicile.

The second floor room . . . was one of the most singular places I have ever seen. It, too, was littered with various objects from end to end, all piled helter skelter on tables, chairs and shelves. A human skull grinned at me from the mantel, and a large bronze vulture spread its menacing pinions above a cage containing a live Gila monster. Bones, recent and fossil, were everywhere, all dusty, and all in apparently inextricable confusion. But Cope himself, the presiding genius among all this scientific chaos, met me with a genial and charming smile, made me sit down and talked, as only Cope could talk, about the things I came to discuss. So began a most interesting acquaintance with this wonderful man.

*Charles R. Knight, autobiography, 2005*



Brilliant pioneer paleontologist Edward Drinker Cope (opposite top) sits at his study table, surrounded by fossils and scientific papers. For several weeks, Cope and Knight conferred in his cluttered drawing room in Philadelphia (opposite bottom), a veritable wizard's lair in which he instructed young Knight in reconstructing dinosaurs. Knight's 1897 painting of fighting drytosaurus, called *Leaping Laelaps* (above), was inspired by Cope's ideas.

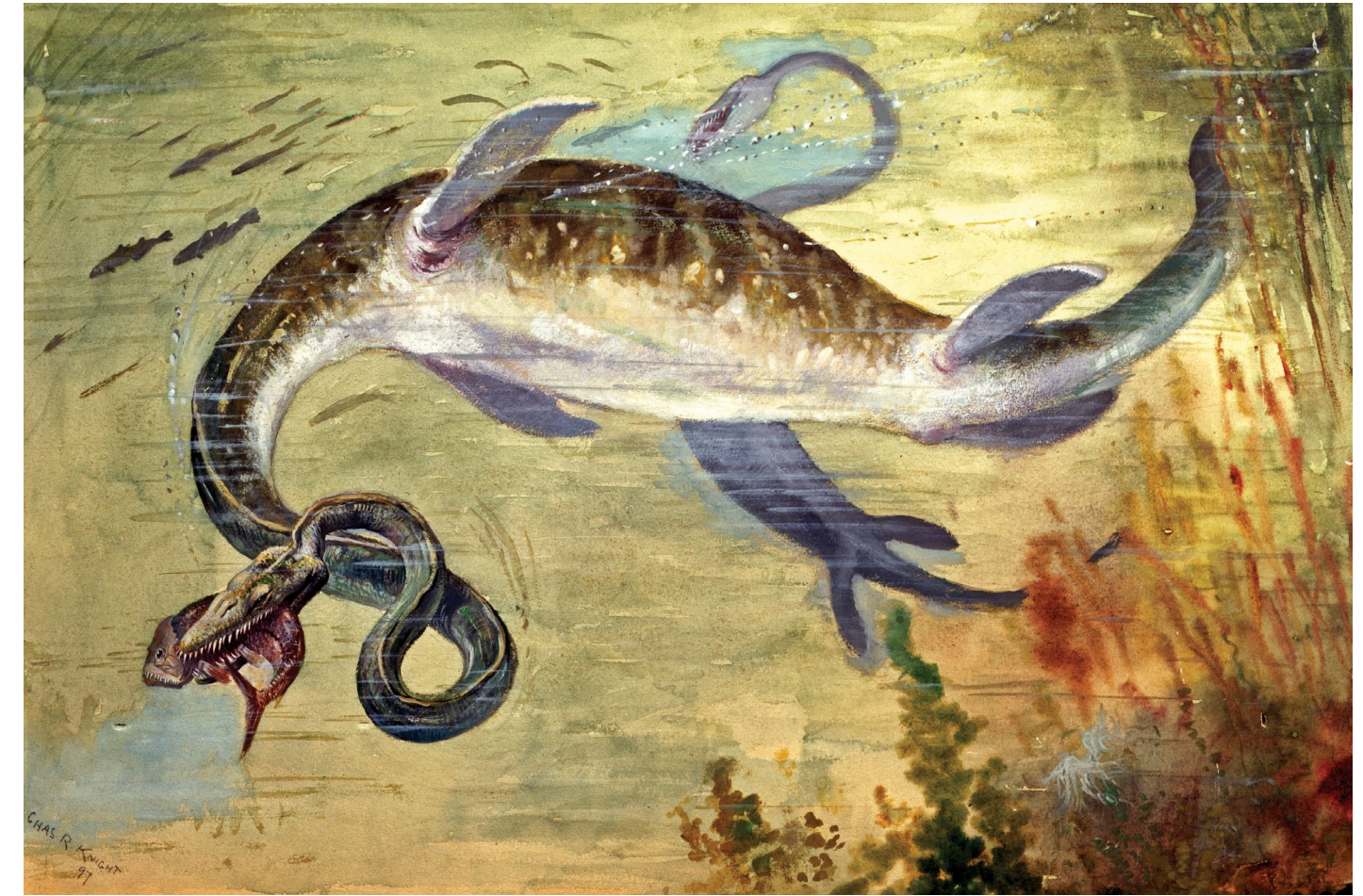
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Cope photos, all Knight paintings, and Cope's original drawings courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History. Last two pages of excerpt courtesy of the Field Museum.



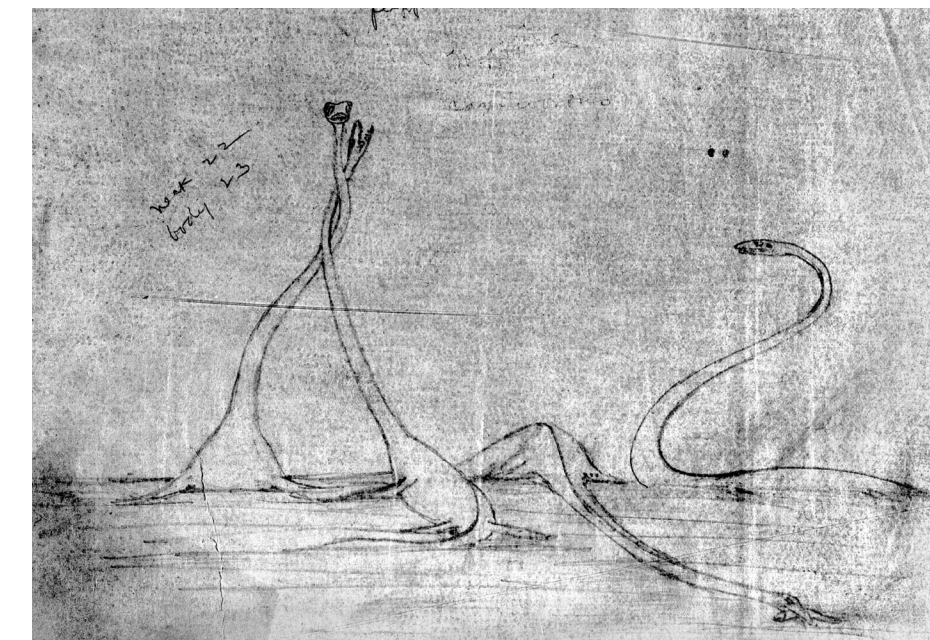
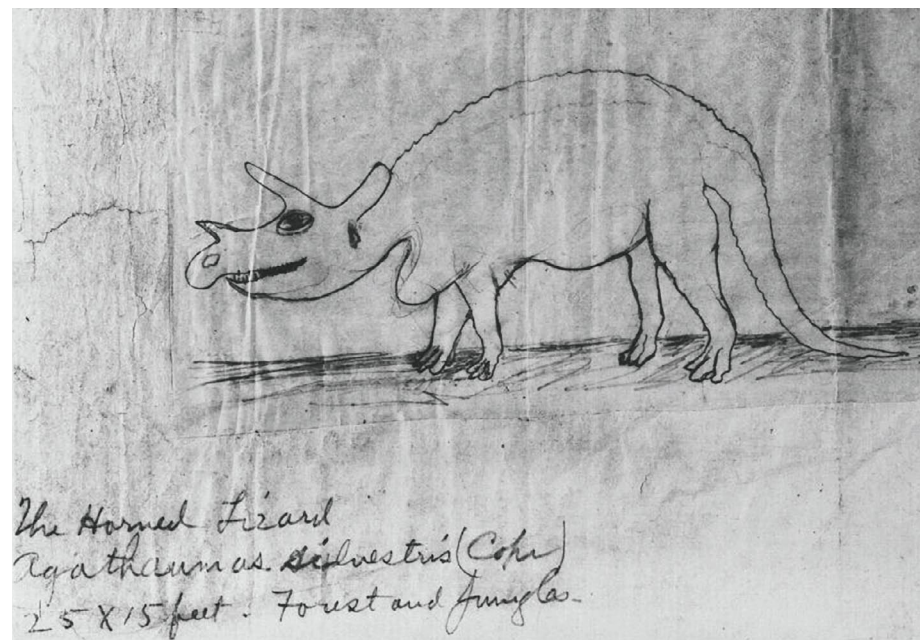
At left is one of Knight's first paintings made with Cope's advice: a so-called *Agathaumus* (1897). Cope made the crude sketch below for guidance. The creature is a mistaken reconstruction, based on incomplete fossils of what was later renamed *Triceratops*. Although it is an erroneous reconstruction, *Agathaumus* was copied and repeated endlessly for many years and became one of the animated models in the silent-film classic *The Lost World* (1925).

This *Elasmosaurus* (right), completed in 1897, was another early collaboration between Knight and Cope. In Cope's sketch below, the animals intertwined their necks, either in combat or a courtship ritual. Cope had initially erred in his reconstruction by situating the skull at the end of its much shorter tail, and was ever after taunted by his rival O. C. Marsh for not knowing one end of a dinosaur from the other.



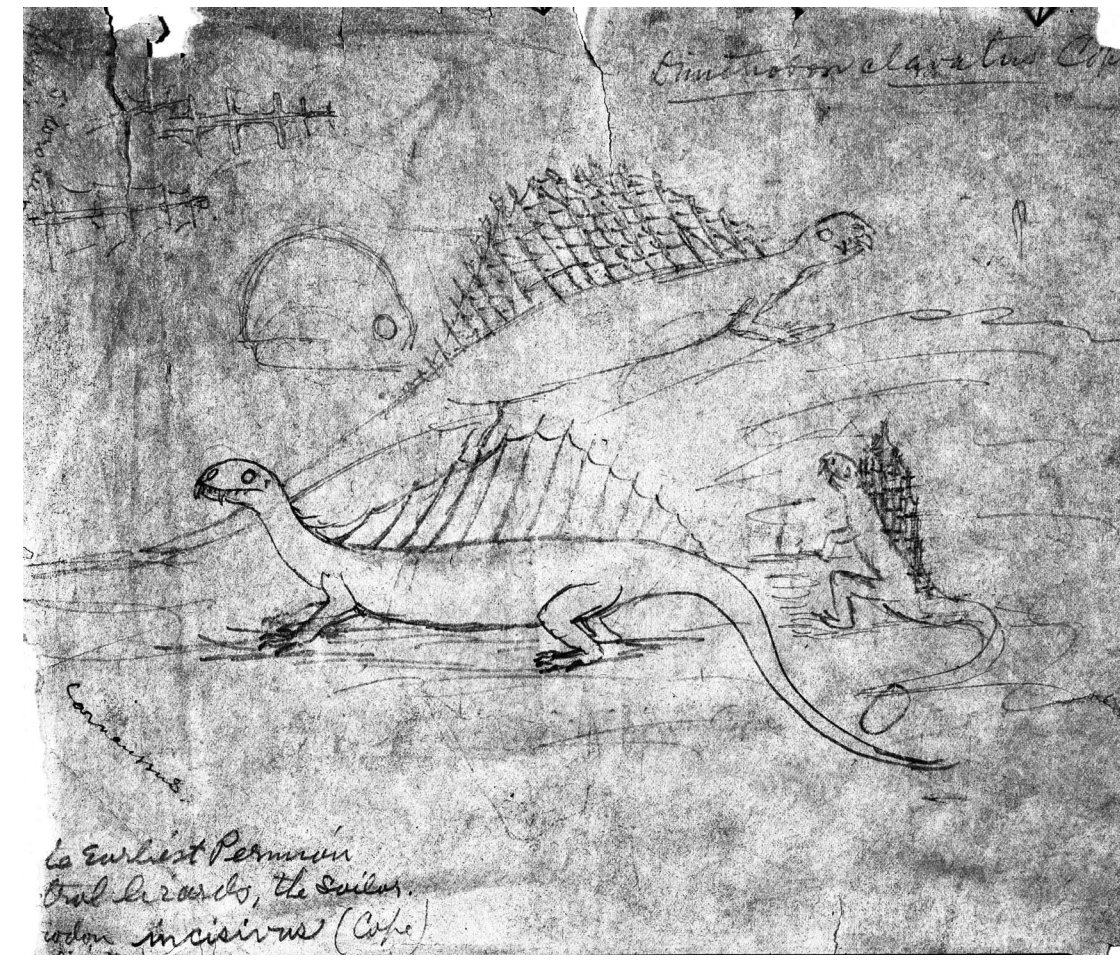
## E. D. COPE'S INTENSE INSPIRATION

I was given a drawing table in the bay window (the only free space in the room) and there every day for the ensuing two weeks I listened with rapt attention to the greatest conversationalist that ever graced the service of Paleontology. With matchless charm this brilliant mind presented the difficult subject to me. . . . Under the spell of his facile tongue new vistas of the life of the past opened before me in a way I had never dreamed of, and Cope drew pictures for me, pictures of the creatures I had to do for the [*Century Magazine*, 1896] and many others, and explained with delightful clarity the methods by which he had arrived at certain conclusions regarding the forms and proportions of these monsters. Under his expert guidance I felt that I had stepped back into an ancient world—filled with all sorts of bizarre and curious things, and in imagination I could picture quite distinctly just what these mighty beasts looked like as they walked or swam in search of food. It was only natural therefore that I applied myself most energetically to the making of my little sketches, took notes, and got Cope's approval of them, enjoying myself hugely meanwhile in such inspiring company.



. . . For here was no mere investigator of dry bones, but a true genius who applied his profound knowledge of Paleontology and its connection with the life of the present day . . . to a clarification and explanation of the life of the past. . . . His bedroom at the front of the house and on the same floor where I worked was also a strange and uncanny spot. Again the pamphlets made a wall from floor to ceiling, completely concealing his little cot from the hallway and leaving only a tiny space about the bed with room for one chair. . . . Thus the little house in Pine Street grew into my life, a strange place filled with strange things, but forever associated in my mind with the brilliant scientist who presided over its treasures, and by his genius made them live again to startle and profoundly interest an astonished world. I was exceedingly lucky to have gone there just when I did because in a few months Professor Cope passed away, leaving behind him a vast accumulation of treasures, a splendid collection of rare fossils and the impress of his virile and extraordinary personality.

*Charles R. Knight, autobiography, 2005*



Knight's classic "sail-back" lizard, or *Dimetrodon*, of the Permian era (left) is shown near a similar *Edaphosaurus* (behind it) in this 1897 tempera painting for the American Museum of Natural History. Like his other restorations from this period, it is based on discussions with his mentor Edward Drinker Cope, whose sketch can be seen above. These bizarre creatures lived millions of years before the dinosaurs and, despite appearances, are thought to be "mammal-like reptiles."



A Permian convention of sail-backed reptiles, or pelycosaurs, notably the meat-eater *Dimetrodon* (on top rock) and plant-eating *Edaphosaurus*, were all found together in a Texas rock formation. In this Field Museum mural, Knight used his sculptural models as aids to depict several similar-looking individuals from different angles.