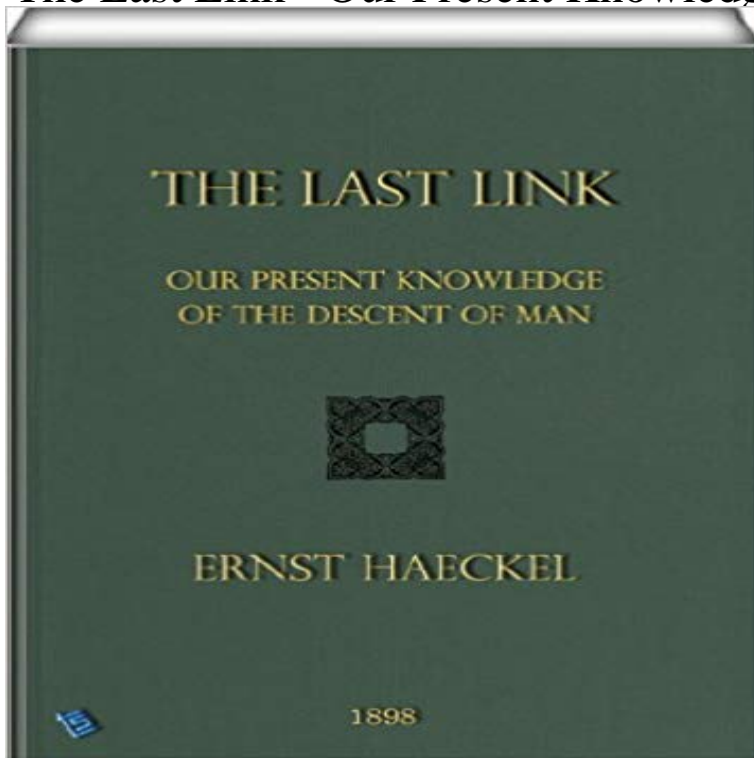


The Last Link - Our Present Knowledge of the Descent of Man



The Last Link - Our Present Knowledge of the Descent of Man by Ernst Haeckel The Last Link - Our Present Knowledge of the Descent of Man by Ernst Haeckel At the end of the nineteenth century, the age of natural science, the department of knowledge that has made most progress is zoology. From zoology has arisen the study of transformism, which now dominates the whole of biology. Lamarck laid its foundation in 1809, and forty years ago Charles Darwin obtained for it a recognition which is now universal. It is not my task to repeat the well-known principles of Darwinism. I am not concerned to explain the scientific value of the whole theory of descent. The whole of our biological study is pervaded by it. No general problem in zoology and botany, in anatomy and physiology, can be discussed without the question arising, How has this problem originated? What are the real causes of its development? This question was almost unknown seventy years ago, when Charles Darwin, the great reformer of biology, began his academical career at Cambridge as a student of theology. In the same year, 1828, Carl Ernst von Baer published in Germany his classical work on the embryology of animals, the first successful attempt to elucidate by observation and reflection the mysterious origin of the animal body from the egg, and to explain in every respect the history of the growing individuality. Darwin at that time had no knowledge of this great advance, and he could not divine that forty years later embryology would be one of the strongest supports of his own life's work of that very theory of transformism which, founded by Lamarck in the year of Darwin's birth, was accepted with enthusiasm by Charles' grandfather Erasmus. There is no doubt that of all the celebrated naturalists of the nineteenth century Darwin achieved the greatest success, and we should be justified in designating the last forty years

as the Age of Darwin. In searching for the causes of this unexampled success, we must clearly separate three sets of considerations: first, the comprehensive reform of Lamarcks transformism, and its firm establishment by the many arguments drawn from modern biology; secondly, the construction of the new theory of selection, as established by Darwin, and independently by Alfred Wallace (a theory called Darwinism in the proper sense); thirdly, the deduction of anthropogeny, that most important conclusion of the theory of descent, the value of which far surpasses all the other truths in evolution. It is the third point of Darwins theory that I shall discuss here; and I shall discuss it chiefly with the intention of examining critically the evidence and the different conclusions which at present represent our scientific knowledge of the descent of man and of the different stages of his animal pedigree.

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