Unnatural History

Unnatural History
An Illustrated Bestiary

Colin Clair

Abelard-Schuman *London New York Toronto*

By the same author:

OF HERBS AND SPICES
KITCHEN AND TABLE: A BEDSIDE HISTORY OF EATING IN THE WESTERN WORLD

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number 66:25012

First published in the United States of America in 1967
First published in Great Britain in 1968

LONDON	NEW YORK	TORONTO
Abelard-Schuman Limited	Abelard-Schuman Limited	Abelard-Schuman Canada Limited
8 *King Street* WC2	6 *West* 57 *Street*	896 *Queen Street West*

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Illustrations

Unnatural History

It is a sottish presumption to disdain and condemn that for false which unto us seemeth to bear no show of likelihood or truth.

Montaigne: Essays

Every generation of man is born to stare at something, which, so long as it eludes their understanding, is a very African *fetish* to the many, and a Gordian knot to the few.

Hawkins: Memoirs of Ichthyosauri and Plesiosauri

dreadful was the din
Of hissing through the hall, thick swarming now
With complicated monsters head and tail,
Scorpion and asp, and amphisbaena dire,
Cerastes horned, hydrus and ellop drear,
And dipsas.

Milton: Paradise Lost

Introduction

We may reasonably call Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) the founder of the science of zoology, for he was the first to collect all the facts then known concerning natural history and arrange them in a co-ordinated manner. One must not expect to find in his work anything in the nature of natural science in our modern sense of the term; yet his book *De Animalibus,* though not free from error, shows for its time a surprising degree of perception. He knew, for example, that whales are mammals, and by his contribution to knowledge he greatly influenced the philosophers and scientists of the Middle Ages.

The great handicap which the ancients suffered was an almost complete lack of any real means of observation. Aristotle, for instance, had to rely largely on reports sent to him by hunters and fishermen; often, too, on the accounts transmitted by soldiers from the widely distant parts of Alexander the Great's empire. Thus a great deal of second-hand misinformation led him into error. Later the Romans set up artificial ponds, called *vivaria,* in which fish were stocked, as well as aviaries for birds; they also formed collections of the larger animals. But they were rarely equipped with contrivances suitable for keeping animals under observation, especially the smaller species; except perhaps for bees, which, on account of their economic importance, merited special study, the honey being used for sweetening, preserving, and embalming, and the wax being put to a variety of uses. The early writers on natural history had an insufficient number of verified facts from which to make useful deductions. They had no knowledge of how to conduct scientific experiments and as a result had difficulty in formulating decided views on the phenomena which they observed about them.

From the end of the Roman Empire and during the greater part of the Middle Ages there was practically no scientific study of nature. What instruction there was came chiefly from

the religious orders. Such instruction had no other source of information but the writings handed down by the ancients, though they were frequently manipulated to serve the ends of theological dogma. In this connection Boethius (480-524 A.D.) exerted a strong influence over the minds of scholars of the Middle Ages. He was a Christian who, linked directly to the classical past, composed a whole series of philosophical works which were esteemed for centuries, and in which he endeavoured to impose the precepts of the Christian faith upon the doctrines of Aristotle and to reconcile the philosophy of the ancients with the teachings of the Church.

From the seventh century onwards the work of Isidore, Archbishop of Seville (d. 636 A.D.), had considerable influence, and his *Origines* became one of the authoritative textbooks until the fourteenth century. Passages from it were quoted in compilations on natural history alongside those of Pliny and Aristotle.

The attitude of the Middle Ages towards the world of nature is difficult for us now to appreciate. It is true that as early as the eighth and ninth centuries several important works had dealt with the nature of the universe, such as Beda's *Natura Rerum*, and *De Divisione Naturae* by Johannes Scotus Erigena, but these were mainly philosophical treatises or homilies which put forward dogmatic conclusions concerning the history of the Creation. In the words of Charles Raven, "the whole attitude towards nature was emblematic . . . men sought in nature not knowledge, but edification; not enlightenment, but the exemplification of preconceived ideas."

Medieval zoology was not concerned with the life history of animals. The early writers who dealt with the animal world were less concerned with facts than with doctrinal significance, facts being considered only as the outward sign of some hidden truth, since God had created the animate world of nature in such a way that its attributes illuminated the essentials of the Christian dogma.

Early in the Christian era preachers and commentators drew upon legends concerning birds and beasts which had been handed down through the centuries for the composition of allegories that would support the doctrines of the Church. This form of natural history, in no way scientific but merely symbolic, is represented in the strange collection of tales about animals called the *Physiologus* (a title that we may translate as "The Naturalist"), which was familiar in many tongues for over a thousand years and was the ancestor of what the Middle Ages termed the "bestiary."

This collection originated somewhere about the fourth century, possibly in Alexandria, or in Greece. Its great diffusion shows its importance, for it exists not only in the ancient classical tongues, but also in the language of every land into which Christianity had penetrated. We find it in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, Ethiopian, old High German, Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, and Provençal, and its influence lasted until the fourteenth century.

The *Physiologus* is not a work of fixed content, copied and multiplied by scribes from a unique copy. It is a compilation which through the centuries was modified and augmented, and, generally speaking, it is rare to find manuscripts of different dates which agree exactly. In its primitive form it was mainly a collection of edifying metaphors, in which each entry began with a quotation from the Scriptures followed by a description, usually entirely fanciful, of the beast, and ending with a moral. Later, the scriptural references were omitted and each article began with "The *Physiologus* says. . . .", so that the work was frequently assumed to be that of an unknown author called Physiologus.

At first the Church was none too happy about the *Physiologus*. In 496 A.D. a synod of Pope Gelasius forbade certain works, including the *Physiologus*, which was described as the work of heretics and falsely ascribed to St. Ambrose. But a century or so later, after Christian moralizations had

been added to it, the book was allowed, and Gregory the Great, by quoting from it frequently, lifted the interdiction. It remained an influential compilation for the next thousand years despite the fact that it had neither literary nor scientific merit.

In the realm of nature the study of botany made headway much faster than zoology. Man studied plants at first for their therapeutic value, and the search for plants which would cure sicknesses and injuries stimulated the observation of botanists and herbalists. But in the animal world for many centuries scientific study was retarded by the theological concept of treating the world of beasts merely as the material for moralizing. As St. Augustine wrote: "The Fathers of the Church were more closely concerned with the purity of the doctrine they sought to expound than with the scientific exactitude of the notions on which they leaned. The important thing for us is to consider the significance of a fact, not to discuss its authenticity."

It is not surprising that the first treatises of natural science which began to appear in the Middle Ages should still embody a multitude of fables, for it took a considerable time for criticism to free the study of natural history from the dead hand of ancient authorities and old traditions.

In England Alexander Neckham was one of the first to produce something better than the medieval bestiaries, in which hardly a single sentence can be accepted as fact. In his *De Naturis Rerum*, written towards the end of the twelfth century, he sets out the natural philosophy and history of his day; but very little of the work is original, for in the main he copies (often word for word) the third-century author of *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium*, Julius Solinus, who himself drew largely in this *Polyhistor*, as it is sometimes called, from the writings of Pliny and others. Another of Neckham's sources was the consul Flavius Cassiodorus (c.480-575 A.D.), who wrote a number of historical works.

But by far the best known of the early treatises on nature by an Englishman was that epitome of medieval lore known as *De Proprietatibus Rerum* ("On the Nature of Things"), compiled by the Franciscan friar Bartholomew Glanville, or Bartholomaeus Anglicus as he was called. This was written towards the end of the thirteenth century, and was first printed in English, in the translation made by John Trevisa, by Wynkyn de Worde in 1491. It was reprinted by Thomas Berthelet in 1535, and by Stephen Batman (as *Batman uppon Bartholomew*), with many additions, omissions and alterations, in 1582. It was, says Robert Steele,* "an encyclopedia of similes for the benefit of the village preaching friar, written for men without deep – sometimes without any – learning. Assuming no previous information, and giving a fairly clear statement of the state of the knowledge of the time, the book was readily welcomed by the class for which it was designed, and by the small nucleus of an educated class which was slowly forming." A great deal of Glanville's material came from the writings of Isidore, Archbishop of Seville; other sources were Pliny, Aristotle, St. Ambrose, and Arab writers such as Avicenna and Albumazar.

Of this vast work (388 double-column pages in Berthelet's edition) Book XVIII deals with animals and is a veritable hotchpotch of information, fascinating to read if only for the light it throws on the attitude of medieval man towards the mysteries of nature. It was a book which retained its popularity for about three centuries, and proved a rich mine exploited by many authors. As Steele writes: "Chester and Du Bartas write page after page of rhyme, all but versified direct from Bartholomew. Jonson and Spenser, Marlowe and Massinger, make ample use of him. Lyly and Drayton owe him a heavy debt." Shakespeare's work shows him to have been as familiar as any with this book, which wielded an immense influence on literature of the Tudor period.

*Mediaeval Lore.

The strange thing about most of the early writings on natural history is that there seemed no desire on the part either of writer or reader to check the scientific accuracy of these often fantastic stories, and there is little doubt that the avidity with which most people embraced legend and fable, preferring them to the unvarnished factual description, greatly hindered the advance of the natural sciences. Even in Shakespeare's day intense credulity and superstition were widespread. The belief in witches and sorcerers, in charms and amulets, in fabulous monsters and legendary lands, was common to all classes of people who avidly devoured tales of

> the Cannibals that each other eat,
> The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
> Do grow beneath their shoulders.

The best sellers of the day were undoubtedly the writers of somewhat unnatural history; those who told of

> Dragons and griffins and monsters dire
> Born of water, or air, or fire.

Of these one of the most popular was Sir John Mandeville. His *Travels,* which circulated in many manuscript versions from the fourteenth century onwards, and was first printed in English by Richard Pynson about 1496, enjoyed a tremendous success, appearing in edition after edition in most of the European languages. Mandeville's influence was far-reaching, and many of his stories found their way into Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* (1544), which enjoyed a like success, appearing in no fewer than forty-seven editions in seven languages before 1650. When Shakespeare was a young man there appeared a popular work with the rather terrifying title of *Doome, warning all men to the Judgmente,* wherein the author speaks of "Oethiopes with four eyes, the Hippopodes, with their nether parts like horses, the Arimaspi with one eye in the forehead, and the men called Monopoli, who have no head, but a face in their breaste."

The first men seriously to set down all that was known about zoology in their day were three Dominicans: Thomas de Cantimpré, Albertus Magnus, and Vincent de Beauvais. Most of their work derived from Aristotle and contained little that was original. In Vincent de Beauvais' vast treatise in ten folio volumes, the *Speculum Naturale*, Aristotle's writings on the history of animals, with those of other ancient writers, are all brought together, as Hallam says, "with vast industry, but with almost a studious desire, as we might now fancy, to accumulate absurd falsehoods." Albertus Magnus was not above telling us that if we wrap the tooth of a wolf in a bay leaf and carry it about with us, no one will have the power to harm or annoy us.

With the coming of the Renaissance, however, and thanks largely to the invention of the printing press, thought began to free itself from the shackles of narrow dogma and, as a result of the religious struggles which marked the end of the Middle Ages, more liberty of thought became possible. Scientific circles began to develop which, although lacking both organization and a definite goal, were nevertheless the precursors of the scientific bodies of a later age.

In 1551 the Paris printer Michael Vascosan printed Edward Wotton's *De Differentiis Animalium*. Its author was physician to Henry VIII, and in 1541 became president of the College of Physicians. It was the first book by an English naturalist to attempt some systematic plan, but again it is merely a compilation of extracts from a bewildering number of ancient Greek and Roman authors. The compendium was no doubt useful to scholars of his time, but it did nothing to advance the scientific study of nature; its main advantage, when compared with Neckham or Bartholomew, is that Wotton is more accurate in his transcription of the older writers and rather less credulous.

The year 1551 also saw the appearance of the first volume of a more important work of this nature – the *Historia*

Animalium of Konrad Gesner (1516-65). This was published by Froschauer in Zurich in five volumes folio between 1551 and 1587 (the last one being posthumous), and contained over 4,000 pages and hundreds of illustrations. With this work, despite its limitations, we reach the beginning of modern zoology.

There still remained, in the work of Gesner, and in that of Aldrovandi, who followed him, much ancient, medieval, and fabulous lore. But this vast compilation showed a great advance upon its predecessors, and although it borrowed freely from Aristotle, Pliny, Aelian, and other ancient writers, it did incorporate numerous original observations. If Gesner placed the hippopotamus among the aquatic animals and the bat among the birds, at least he rejected all the plainly fabulous animals and introduced many new ones. Tournefort gave him the title of "Father of Natural History, whose works offer the best-furnished repository," and Cuvier wrote that "Gesner's *History of Animals* may be considered as the basis of all modern zoology; copied almost literally by Aldrovandus, abridged by Jonston, it has become the foundation of much more recent works; and more than one famous author has borrowed from it silently most of his learning."

A great point in its favour was the abundance of the illustrations, for at a time when comparatively few could read, and fewer still read in Latin, the pictures could interest a wide audience. As the late Professor Sarton pointed out, "Self-made men in business, or even in science, who had not learned Latin in their youth, could never overcome that initial handicap. But they could learn a good deal of zoology by examining the pictures in Gesner and Aldrovandi and spelling out the legends and a minimum of text."

Indeed, although crude compared with what we expect nowadays, the drawings in Gesner's work were a great advance on what had hitherto appeared in works of a similar nature. We know little about the artists who supplied them, except

for Dürer's well-known woodcut of a rhinoceros. (Incidentally, the original drawing from which the woodcut was made is in the British Museum.) Gesner tells us that the figures of birds were drawn by Lucas Schroen, and he mentions also two Zurich artists, Jean Asper and Jean Thomas. The drawing of a giraffe was copied from that in the 1486 edition of Breydenbach's *Travels;* others come from the *Exotica* of Charles de l'Ecluse and the works of Belon and Rondelet. The last-named had been a friend of his when he stayed in Montpellier around the year 1540. Gesner, indeed, had many friends in various parts of Europe, and all willingly put their knowledge at his disposal. Among them was that pioneer English botanist, the physician William Turner.

The defects in Gesner are mostly those of his time. Nevertheless by his zeal, his erudition, and his indefatigable labours, he produced a work which was held in high esteem down to the end of the seventeenth century. "No one knows," he wrote, "how long and difficult a task it is to compare the work of different authors, to blend it all into a uniform whole, to omit nothing and to repeat nothing, until one has tried it. I have bestowed the utmost care on my work, and I would like to think that henceforward it will be unnecessary to seek in other authors for the subjects treated; that it will provide, in a manner of speaking, a library in a single work."

The sixteenth century saw the emergence of five outstanding naturalists: Gesner, Rondelet, Salviani, Pierre Belon, and Aldrovandi. Ulisse Aldrovandi (*c.* 1522-1605) was a native of Bologna. While studying at Rome he made the acquaintance of Rondelet, who had come to that city as physician to Cardinal de Tournon, and it was due in great measure to Rondelet that he began his studies in natural history. Aldrovandi's great encyclopedia on that subject was even larger than that of Gesner. The first volume, *Ornithologia,* was published in 1599, when its author was already about seventy-seven, and three other volumes appeared during his lifetime.

Nine more were issued between 1613 and 1668. Of the four volumes which came out before his death, three were on birds and one on insects; the fifth, which he had finished and which was published by his widow, dealt with "other bloodless animals." The volumes which appeared after his death were completed to his plan by Cornelius Uterverius, Bartholomew Ambrosinus, Ovid Montalbanus, and the Scotsman Thomas Dempster, who was also a professor at Bologna.

Aldrovandi was better able than Gesner to undertake a long and exacting labour of this sort. Gesner published his history of animals when he was thirty-five and overloaded with other work. Aldrovandi spent most of his long life in preparing his, and, as we have seen, was more than twice as old as Gesner before he published his first volume. Yet his work showed very little advance on that of Gesner, from whom he borrowed most of his material. Buffon declared that if the useless parts of his work were removed the whole would be reduced to a tenth of its volume.

Guillaume Rondelet (1507-66), who was a professor of medicine at Montpellier, specialized in botany and ichthyology. His principal work in the latter field was his *De Piscibus Marinis* (Lyons, 1554), a second part following in 1555. One of the attractions of this work lies in the drawings, which are exceedingly good for the period, though not comparable with the beautiful engravings that illustrate Salviani's *Aquatilium Animalium Historia,* which appeared in 1558. Rondelet was more correct in his descriptions than were his predecessors in the same field, but like other writers of the Renaissance had his due share of fanciful credulity. For instance he says that bass go blind in winter "because of the stones they carry in their heads, which become very cold and troublesome when the temperature is at a low range." He also describes and illustrates the sea-monk and sea-bishop, the first of which, he tells us, derives its name from its monk's cowl and tonsured head. It also had a face resembling that of a human being. We must remember, however, when we look at some of the queer

drawings which accompany many of these early works of natural history, that neither these nor the text which accompanied them were intended deliberately to mislead; they were distorted images. As "Morus" (Richard Lewinsohn) explains in his *Animals, Men and Myths*, the men of the Renaissance "were surrealists, who projected the antique tradition and the products of their own imagination into reality, and by so doing increased their range of vision without ever quite leaving the plane of the real. The fabulous animals of antiquity now took on a reality they had never had in the Middle Ages. All forms of them were admitted into zoology, where they were counted just as real in every attribute as animals that had actually been seen."

But the rapid expansion of travel which followed hard on the discoveries of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus led to direct observation by travellers who soon began to see for themselves exotic birds and animals. Unfortunately many of the sailors who returned from the New World, or from service with the Muscovy Company, were very prone to exaggerate what they had seen to impress their credulous listeners. And even scholars were not immune.

As Gesner has been mentioned, it would be unfair not to say a few words about the man responsible for introducing him to an English audience. This was the Reverend Edward Topsell, who, half a century after the publication in Zurich of the *Historia Animalium*, brought out his *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes*, published by Jaggard in 1607, which is in the main a translation of extracts from Gesner's great work. Topsell, born in 1572, was a graduate of Christ's College, Cambridge. He took holy orders, and from 1592 onwards held various livings in Sussex, Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire. In 1604 he was appointed perpetual curate of St. Botolph's, Aldersgate, where he was buried at the end of 1624 or beginning of 1625. He wrote a number of theological works, long since forgotten, and today his only claim to fame is as the compiler of the above-mentioned book and of a *Historie of*

Serpents (1608). Although he lived well into the seventeenth century, Topsell was hardly more modern in spirit than Bartholomew, but then, as Warton remarked, "every goblin of ignorance did not vanish at the first glimmerings of the morning of science," and Topsell lived on into the reign of a monarch whose superstition and credulity was a byword.

Topsell was no biologist. He knew nothing about animals other than what had already been written, and he approached the study of them in just the same fashion as the medieval theologians did, looking upon them from the viewpoint of the preacher anxious for the moral edification of his readers. Though on occasion he cannot help thinking some of the assertions of the ancients in these matters to be manifestly untrue, on the whole he mingles fact and fancy with little discrimination. He inveighs against those who are sceptical as to the existence of the unicorn, and pours his ecclesiastical scorn on "the vulgar sort of infidell people which scarcely beleeve any hearbe but such as they see in their owne gardens, or any beast but such as is in their owne flocks." He quotes the Scriptures to his purpose, reminding his readers that Psalm 92 expressly states: "My horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of of an unicorn."

He acknowledges his debt to Gesner, saying: "I do confess him my Author in most of my Stories, yet I have gathered up what he let fall," in proof whereof he appends a list of numerous "authorities" whom he has consulted. Most of Topsell's large section on dogs, for instance, is taken verbatim from Abraham Fleming's translation of *De Canibus Britannicis* by John Caius, physician and co-founder of the Cambridge college which bears his name; and he also borrowed much from the same author's *Rariorum Animalium*. From Thomas Blundeville's *Art of Riding and Breakinge great Horses*, and from Gervase Markham's *Discourse on Horsemanshippe*, he took the material for his section on the diseases of the horse.

Topsell modestly confesses that his book is no more than a

compilation, for he writes: "I acknowledge that no man must looke for that at my handes which I have not received from some other." Nevertheless we must be grateful to him for his immense industry in garnering, translating and collating all the material for what is, after all, a fascinating book to read. To understand something of the credulity of our forefathers in the matter of monsters, one cannot do better than read Topsell, where are to be found marvellous accounts of those "things right rare and strange" which so delighted his contemporaries. And, as Raven says: "If he was himself no naturalist, his books had a share in fostering the love of nature in others."

Topsell borrowed much of his writings from Pliny, as did many of the early naturalists, but although Pliny reports many fabulous things, he did not always believe them, but merely reported what he heard from others. He says, in his chapter on fabulous birds: "As for the fowles called Pegasi, headed like horses; and the Griffons, which are supposed to have long eares and a hooked bill, I take them to be meere fables: and yet they say that the Pegasi should be in Scythia and the Griffons in Ethyopia. Moreover I thinke the same of the Tragopanades, which many men affirm to be greater than the Egle, having crooked horns like a Ram on either side of the head, of the colour of iron, and the head only red. As touching the Birds Syrenes, I will never beleeve there be any such, let Dino, the father of Clitarchus that renowned writer, say what he will; who avoucheth for a truth that they be in India, and that with their singing they will bring folk asleep, and then fly upon them and tear them in pieces. He that will give credit to these fables may even as well beleeve that dragons forsooth taught Melampus by licking his eares how to understand the language of birds."

The passages from Pliny given in this book are taken from the translation made by Philemon Holland and published in 1601.

Early Zoological Illustration

Before the introduction of printing few people knew the semblance of any animals apart from the domestic species they saw around them in their native village, or a few animals of the chase, such as deer. They had not the remotest idea of what an elephant, or a camel, or a tiger looked like. Bestiaries were a favourite medium for the medieval artist in which to display his talent for drawing the life of nature, but these books, in manuscript form, could only be enjoyed by the rich, and in any case few people could read. Manuscripts with illustrations of birds and animals were to be found only in the libraries of kings and nobles or in the scriptoria of the great monasteries.

Early illustrations of natural history were often crude. In the *Physiologus* manuscripts and in the works of the encyclopaedists of the early Middle Ages, although animals are sometimes represented, it is not always possible to recognize them. When it came to depicting exotic animals, such as are mentioned, for instance, in the Scriptures, the fancies of the artist were no more restrained than in his representation of fabulous monsters.

When the craft of printing arrived in Western Europe drawings could be multiplied a thousandfold, and thus reach a far wider audience, but it took a long time to rid the mind of blind faith in authorities and to seek, not from books, but from nature itself, the secrets of zoology.

The first printed book on natural history with woodcut illustrations was Konrad von Megenberg's *Das buch der natur*, based on the *Liber de natura rerum* written by Thomas de Cantimpré about the middle of the thirteenth century, and translated by Von Megenberg a hundred years later. It was published at Augsburg by Hans Bämler in 1775, and by 1500 had already gone into its sixth edition. It had twelve woodcut figures, varying considerably in quality.

From the artistic point of view the illustrations in the first printed books were not nearly as good as the often remarkable work of the decorators of the manuscripts they gradually displaced. This is understandable, for the woodcutter's art was still in its infancy.

The first illustrated book on natural history to be published in England was one we have already noted: Wynkyn de Worde's edition of John of Trevisa's translation of *De Proprietatibus Rerum* ("On the Nature of Things"), the work of Bartholomew Glanville. It contains a number of woodcuts of no great artistic value, most of them being rather poor copies of woodcuts used in books printed on the Continent. These early woodcuts have no artist's mark or name, and it is not known who was responsible for them.

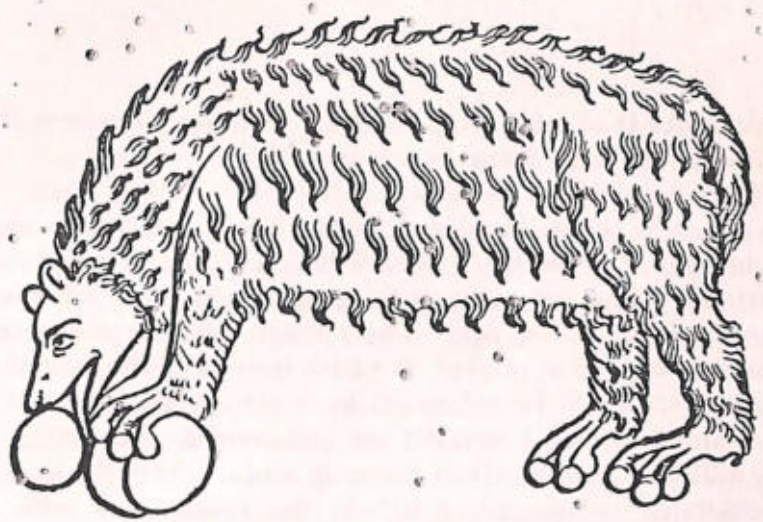
A Flemish edition of Bartholomew's work, although published ten years earlier than Wynkyn de Worde's edition, contained far better illustrations, and for a very long time the technical capacity of the English woodcutter was inferior to that of his German or French counterpart.

The *Cosmographia* of Sebastian Münster, published at Basle in 1544 by Henricus Petrus, and several times reprinted, includes among its numerous illustrations a rather poor copy, reversed, of Albrecht Dürer's celebrated woodcut of a rhinoceros. The woodcut was made by Dürer from a description and sketch enclosed in a letter written by one Valentin Ferdinand to his friends in Nuremberg, and sent from Lisbon, where in 1513 a live rhinoceros arrived from India as a present to King Manuel of Portugal.

It was difficult for English artists to emulate their continental rivals in the matter of portraying the wild life of far-off countries, for whereas fairly rare animals were frequently to be found throughout the Middle Ages in the collections of wealthy princes in Turkey, France, and Italy, there was no Royal Zoological Gardens in England until the nineteenth century. We learn from Paul Hentzner, a German

lawyer who visited England in 1598, that the royal menagerie housed in the Tower of London contained only three lionesses, one lion, a lynx, a wolf (excessively old), a porcupine and an eagle. From time to time some enterprising showman would exhibit a few wild animals at Bartholomew Fair, and as late as the beginning of the eighteenth century Sir Hans Sloane had to visit that fair in order to study certain strange animals which he could see nowhere else in England. That is why we find that English artists of those bygone days could portray domestic animals quite well, but were largely dependent on tradition for their conception of exotic animals. Many of the woodcuts of quaint animals and fishes which we find in early books on natural history were merely fantastic figments of the artist's imagination.

ANIMALS



Bear licking its welps into shape
[*from a twelfth century bestiary*]

The Bear

The white bears all in a dim blue world,
Mumbling their meals by twilight.

Jean Ingelow

The popular idea that bears licked their cubs into shape endured for centuries, and from this fable of maternal triumph over formlessness came the proverbial expression "an unlicked cub." Shakespeare, in *Henry VI, Part 3,* writes:

> Like to Chaos, or an unlick'd bear whelp,
> That carries no impression like the dam.

The story is common both to Aristotle and Pliny, the latter telling us that "bears couple in the beginning of winter. The female then retires by herself to a separate den, and then brings forth, on the thirtieth day, mostly five young ones. When first born they are shapeless masses of white flesh, but

little larger than mice, their claws alone being prominent. The mother then licks them into proper shape."

That this fiction was seriously believed well into the seventeenth century is shown by Sir Thomas Browne's argument against its verity, in which he says "that a bear brings forth her young informous and unshapen, which she fashioneth after by licking them over, is an opinion not only vulgar, and common with us at present, but hath been of old delivered by ancient writers." To refute it, he mentions the remarks of Matthiolus, in his *Comment on Dioscorides,* who said: "In the valley of Anania, about Trent, in a bear which the hunters eventerated or opened, I beheld the young ones with all their parts distinct, and not without shape, as many conceive – giving more credit unto Aristotle and Pliny than experience and their proper senses." Moreover, says Browne, "men hereby do in a high measure vilify the works of God, imputing that unto the tongue of a beast which is the strangest artifice in all the acts of Nature."

In Greek mythology Artemis, the sister of Apollo, was closely associated with the bear (she turned Callisto into one), and the worship of Artemis in Arcadia had as one of its features the consecration to her service of young girls between five and ten years of age who were called *arctoi,* or brown bears. They danced the dance of the bears around the shrine of the goddess during the quinquennial ceremony known as the Brauronia, from Brauron in Attica where it took place. Artemis was thus regarded as a she-bear with her cubs.

Bears hibernate during the depth of winter mainly because there is no food for them, and when they emerge in the spring from their protracted fast they are but a shadow of their normal burly selves. This underlines the ancient legend of Artemis' fury with the Athenians when, through famine during a siege, they slew one of her sacred bears. As a punishment for killing a beast which itself set an example of abstinence, the goddess rendered the carcass useless for food.

Pliny tells us that the head of the bear is its weakest part, and that many were killed in the Roman arena by a blow on the head with the fist. "The people of Spain," he writes, "have a belief that there is some kind of magical poison in the brain of the bear, and therefore burn the heads of those that have been killed in their public games, for it is averred that the brain, when mixed with drink, produces in man a rage identical with that of the bear."

Olaus Magnus, being a Scandinavian, naturally writes mainly about the polar bear, and after relating how the hunter obtains the skin of a white bear, says: "These white bear skins are wont to be offered by the hunters for the high Altars of Cathedrals, or Parochial Churches, that the Priest, celebrating Mass standing, may not take cold of his feet when the Weather is extream cold. In the church at Nidrosum, which is the Metropolis of the Kingdom of Norway, every year such white skins are found, that are faithfully offered by the Hunters Devotion, whensoever they take them, and Wolves-Skins to buy Wax-lights, and to burn them in honour of the Saints."

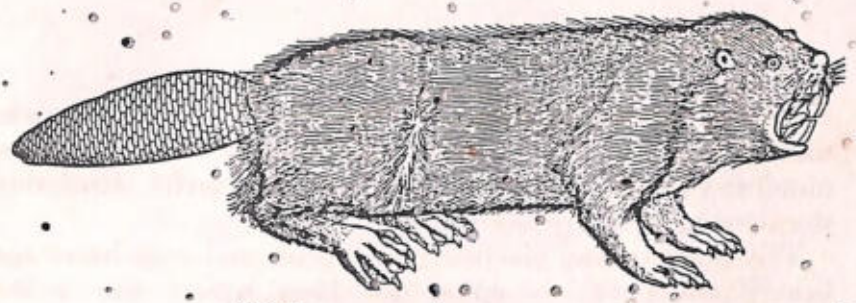
Another curious belief was that the hungry bear found nourishment by sucking its forepaws, and in old books of natural history he is frequently depicted so doing. The belief is embodied in the *Bonduca* of Beaumont and Fletcher, where we read of those

> Just like a brace of bear-whelps, close and crafty,
> Sucking their fingers for their food.

The bear figures prominently in history, heraldry, art, and folklore. It forms the badges of the earls of Warwick and Leicester, and from a similar heraldic device its bearer, Albert, Margrave of Brandenburg, became know as "The Bear." The bear and ragged staff which appears as the crest of the Nevilles and later earls of Warwick originated, it is said, with the first earl, one Arthgal, a knight of the Round Table, whose cognizance was a bear. The second earl, Morvid, having

overcome, in single combat, a mighty giant whose club was nothing less than an uprooted tree, stripped of its branches, added to his device of the bear the "ragged staff" in memory of this momentous contest.

Among the many medieval romances in which the bear figures, probably the best known is the story of Valentine and Orson, the twin brothers, one of whom, Orson, was carried off by a bear which suckled him with her cubs. When he grew up he terrorized all France and was known as the Wild Man of the Woods, but was later reclaimed by Valentine. The story was printed as a chapbook right up until the middle of the nineteenth century.



Beaver
[Topsell: *Historie of Feure-footed Beastes,* 1607]

A Conceit About the Beaver

A very old legend concerning the beaver was promulgated in the *Physiologus,* namely that the beaver, when he sees he is being chased by a hunter, bites off his testicles and casts them before his pursuer, escaping by flight when the hunter stops to examine them. Some bestiaries add to this, and say that if chased by a second hunter the beaver lifts himself up and shows his genitals. When the hunter perceives the testicles to be missing he leaves the beaver alone.

The story was rejected by Sir Thomas Browne in his *Vulgar Errors.* "It is," he says, "a tenet very ancient; and hath had, thereby, advantage of propagation. . . . The original of the conceit was probably Hieroglyphical, which after became Mythological unto the Greeks, and so set down by Aesop; and by process of tradition stole into a total verity, which was but partially true, that is, in its covert sense and morality."

What that covert sense and morality is, he explains thus: "If therefore, any affirm a wise man should demean himself like the beaver, who, to escape with his life, contemneth the loss of his genitals, that is, in case of extremity, not strictly to endeavour the preservation of all, but to sit down in the enjoyment of the greater good, though with the detriment and hazard of the lesser, we may hereby apprehend a real and useful truth."

It is in this spirit, Browne claims, that we are content to receive other fables, such as the story of Medea, who murdered and cut in pieces her brother Absyrtus, scattering the remains to delay her father in his pursuit.

The old bestiaries claimed that the severed testicles of the beaver contained a capital medicine which was called "castoreum," from *castor* the Latin name for a beaver ("castor" was not long ago the slang expression for a hat of beaver's skin). Actually the testicles of a beaver are internal, and therefore could not be bitten off.

Topsell informs us that the beaver's tail was a table delicacy. "This taile he useth for a sterne when he swimmeth after fish to catch them. There hath beene taken of them whose tayles have waied foure pound waight, and they are accounted a very delicate dish, for being dressed they eat like Barbles: they are used by the *Lotharingians* and *Savoyens* for meat allowed to be eaten on fishe-daies, although the body that beareth them be flesh and uncleane for food. The manner of their dressing is, first roasting, and afterwards seething in an open pot, so that the evill vapour may go away, and some in pottage made with Saffron; other with Ginger, and many with Brine: it is certaine that the tayle and forefeet tast very sweet, from whence came the Proverbe, *That sweet is that fish which is not fish at all.*"

Camel
[Topsell: *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes,* 1607]

The Unwearied Camel

Unwearied as the camel, day by day,
Tracks through unwatered wilds his doleful way.

Thus Topsell: "*Ptolomeus Lagi* brought two straunge thinges into Egypt, a blacke camell, and a man which was the one halfe white and the other halfe blacke in equall proportion, the which caused the Egyptians to wonder and marvaile at the shape and proportion of the camell, and to laugh at the man; whereupon it grew to a proverbe, a Camell among the Egyptians, for a matter fearefull at the first, and ridiculous at the last.

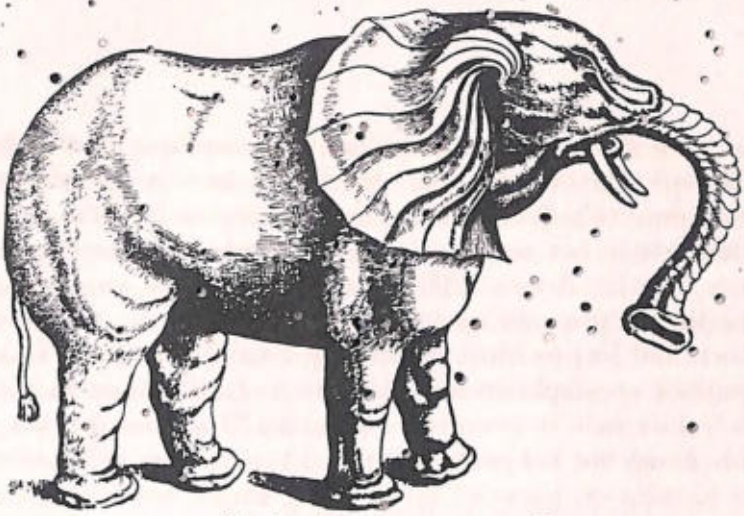
"I have seen in Alcair [Cairo] a camell that could dance at the sound of a Timbrell, being thereunto taught when he was young by this meanes; first he was brought into a roome like a stable, the pavement whereof was made hot by a fire underneath it, and without doors stood a musitian playing on his timbrell, the camell not for love of the musick, but for the heat under his feete, lifted up first one foot, and then another,

as they doe which daunce, and so the heat increasing, he likewise did lift up faster, whereunto he was accustomed for the space of ten moneths, at every time one houre and a halfe, during which time the timbrell still sounded; so that at last use framed nature to such a straine, that he hearing a timbrell, he instantly remembred the fire that was wont to punish his feet, and so presently would leap to and fro like a dancer in publick spectacle, to the admiration of all beholders."

To us such a perversion of animal training appears quite revolting, but not to the Reverend Edward Topsell; nor would it have been to any of his contemporaries, for the men of his time had no compunction over seeing animals suffer, if they provided amusement.

A belief which had a long life was that the camel is so embittered by its ugliness of form and feature that, before drinking, it always stirs up and muddies the water so that it shall not have to look upon its own reflection. Such a belief must have come originally from the imagination of an early writer who, pained by the creature's ugliness, perhaps subconsciously invented this transposition of the Narcissus theme. Once an assertion of this sort was made by a classical writer it was never questioned, but faithfully repeated for centuries. Like the story of the ram which "when he slepeth, from spring-time till harvest he lyeth on the one side, and from harvest till spring-time againe on the other side."

Strangely enough, as George Jennison points out in *Noah's Cargo*, "Africa, arid deserts, shifting sands, and a scorching sun, is symbolized in the camel, yet that continent received it almost the last. Into most of Northern Africa it was introduced by the Goths and Vandals as late as the sixth century. It was unused by Egypt in her day of glory." Actually the earliest prehistoric remains of the camel have been found in Mexico. It did not arrive in Egypt until the time of the Romans.



Elephant
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

The Mighty Elephant

Of all the beasts which Thou this day didst build
To haunt the hills, the forest and the field,
I see, as viceroy of the brutish band
The elephant the vanguard doth command.
Du Bartas: Divine Weekes & Works

Many curious beliefs grew up around the elephant. *Physiologus* tells us that when the bone of an elephant shall be burnt, or his hair singed, the smell of it shall drive away serpents and all poison. "Elephants," writes Pliny, "embrace goodness, honesty, prudence and equity (rare qualities, I assure you, in man) and hold in religious reverence the stars, planets, sun and moon." We also read that "the elephant is a beast of great strength, but greater wit, and greatest ambition; insomuch that some have written of them that if you praise them they will kill themselves with labour, and if you command another before them they will break their hearts with emulation."

One belief which was widespread right up to the seventeenth century was that the elephant had no joints in its leg. Although Aristotle contradicted this idea, which was common

in his time, the legend persisted. It was propagated in Britain through the writings of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, and in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* we read: "The elephant hath joints, but none for courtesy; his legs are legs for necessity, not for flexure." Thus Isidore of Seville asserts that the elephant cannot lie down (proof that he never saw one), and therefore had to lean against a wall or tree to go to sleep. To capture an elephant one had only to knock down the wall or fell the tree – the jointless animal could not rise to escape. In his *Emblems,* Whitney writes:

> The elephant so huge and strong to see
> No perill fear'd but thought a sleepe to gaine;
> But foes before had undermined the tree,
> And down he falls, and so by them was slaine.

On this belief Sir Thomas Browne poured scorn. This "popular and received tenet," he says, "is not the daughter of later times, but an old and grey-headed error, even in the days of Aristotle, as he delivereth in his book *De Incessu Animalium,* and stands successively related by several other authors; by Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Ambrose, Cassiodore, Solinus, and many more. Now herein, methinks, men much forget themselves, not well considering the absurdity of such assertions. For first, they affirm it hath no joints, and yet concede it walks and moves about. . . . Again, while men conceive they never lie down, and enjoy not the position of rest ordained unto all pedestrious animals, hereby they imagine (what reason cannot conceive), that an animal of the vastest dimension and longest duration, should live in a continual motion, without that alternity and vicissitude of rest whereby all others continue; and yet must thus much come to pass, if we opinion they lie not down and enjoy no decumbence at all."

Another curious belief among classical authors was that the elephant was afraid of a mouse, though none of them gave any reason for this rather abnormal sensibility. Perhaps it was

the squeaking of mice which got on their nerves, for according to the old chroniclers the great Alexander routed the elephants of the enemy by means of the squealing of pigs. Finding his advance opposed by a great array of "olyphauntes berynge castelles of trees on theyr bakkes and knyghtes in ye castelles for ye batayle," Alexander brought to the battlefield a herd of swine, whereupon the "jarrynge of ye pygges" completely unnerved the elephants, which turned tail and began "to flee eche one and keste down ye castelles and slewe ye knyghtes. By this meane Alysaundre had ye vyctorie."

One thing upon which most writers seemed to agree was the huge animal's intelligence. Topsell has a delightful account of the elephant, from which we extract the following: "There is not any creature so capable of understanding as an Elephant. They have a wonderfull love to theire owne Countrey, so as although they be never so well delighted with divers meats and joyes in other places, yet in memory thereof they send forth teares.

"It will forbeare drinke eight daies together, and drinke wine to drunkennesse like an Ape. It is delighted above measure with sweet savours, oyntments, and smelling flowers, for which cause their keepers will in the Summer time lead them into the medowes of flowers, where they of themselves will by the quicknes of their smelling, chuse out and gather the sweetest flowers, and put them into a basket if their keeper have any; which, being filled, like daintie and neat men, they also desire to wash, and so will go and seeke out water to wash themselves, and of their owne accord returne backe againe to the basket of flowers, which if they find not they will bray and call for them. Afterwards, being led into their stable, they will not eat meat untill they take of their flowers and dresse the brims of their maungers therewith, and likewise strew their roome or standing place, pleasing themselves with their meat because of the savor of the Flowers stucke about their cratch, like dainty fed persons which set

their dishes with greene hearbs, and put them into their cups of wine.

"Their industrious care to performe the thinges they are taught appeareth heerin bycause when they are secret and alone by themselves, they will practise leaping, dancing, and other strange feats, which they could not learn suddenly in the presence of their maister (so Pliny affirmeth) for certaine truth of an Elephant which was dull and hard of understanding, his keeper found him in the night practising those thinges which hee had taught him with many stripes the day before, and could not prevaile by reason of the beast's slow conceit."

Jordanus, writing early in the fourteenth century, gives, for his time, an excellent description of the elephant; nothing better was written until centuries later. "These animals," he writes, "are marvellous; for they exceed in bulk and strength, and also in understanding all other animals in the world. This animal hath a big head and small eyes, smaller than a horse's; its ears are like the wings of owls or bats; it has a nose reaching to the ground, extending right down from the top of its head, and two tusks of remarkable magnitude in bulk and length, and these are teeth rooted in the upper jaw. This animal doth everything by word of command; so that his driver hath nothing to do but say once 'Do this!' and he doeth it; nor doth he seem in other respects a brute, but rather a rational creature. They have very big feet with six hoofs like those of an ox, or rather of a camel. This animal carryeth easily upon him with a certain structure of timber [hauda] more than thirty men."

The elephant played a conspicuous part in eastern warfare for centuries. That ambitious military adventurer Pyrrhus employed them when, in conjunction with the Greeks of Tarentum, he led an unsuccessful march upon Rome in 280 B.C. And we know that the Carthaginians, in the time of Hannibal (247-182 B.C.) used them in their wars. When the Romans in Leucania first caught sight of the elephants employed by Pyrrhus they called them "Leucanian oxen." Later

the Romans themselves made use of elephants, but more for parade than anything else. Julius Caesar had no great opinion of their merits in battle. After his defeat of Pharnaces at Zela in 47 B.C., the battle which was the occasion for his famous dispatch, *Veni, vidi, vici,* he sent to Rome for forty elephants, but added: "They will, of course, be no use except to make a show."

The Roman generals employed elephants for their triumphs, for by their size they symbolized power, and were used almost exclusively for imperial pageants.

The elephants of Pyrrhus were the first to be employed in a Roman triumph and, until the decline of the empire, were paraded through the streets of Rome whenever a victory was celebrated. According to Suetonius, Julius Caesar, on the day of his Gallic triumph, ascended the steps of the Capitol between two lines of elephants, 40 all told, which acted as torchbearers. (Topsell, incidentally, makes the number of elephants 400, which would have somewhat crowded the steps of the Capitol.) Suetonius tells us also that among the public shows which Julius Caesar loved to stage, wild-beast hunts took place on five consecutive days and the entertainment concluded with a battle between two armies, each made up of 500 infantry, 30 horsemen and 20 elephants.

The first Roman general actually to harness elephants to his car for a triumph was Pompey, but to his mortification he found the gate by which he had to enter the city too narrow for this ostentatious display, and the conqueror had to content himself with horses. Pliny states that two elephants, yoked together, were to have been used, but Plutarch doubles that number.

In the Book of the Maccabees, one of the books of the Apocrypha, we are given some details concerning the war-elephants of Antiochus, the Seleucid king who was finally defeated by Scipio Africanus. We read therein:

"The number of his army was an hundred thousand footmen, and twenty thousand horsemen, and two and thirty

elephants exercised in battle. . . . And to provoke the elephants to fight they showed them the blood of grapes and mulberries.

"And they set the beasts according to the ranges; so that by every elephant there stood a thousand men armed with coats of mail and helmets of brass upon their heads, and unto every beast was ordained five hundred horsemen of the best. Which were ready at all times wheresoever the beast was; and whithersoever the beast went, they went also, and departed not from him.

"And upon them were strong towers of wood that covered every beast, which were fastened thereon with instruments, and upon every one was two and thirty men that fought in them, and the Indian that ruled him."

But this mighty array failed to daunt the enemy, for the tale continues: "Then Judas and his host entered into the battle, and they slew six hundred men of the king's army. Now when Eleazar, the son of Abaron, saw one of the elephants armed with royal harness, and was more excellent than all the other beasts, he thought that the king should be upon him. Wherefore he jeoparded himself to deliver his people and to get him a perpetual name. And ran boldly unto him through the middle of the host, slaying on the right hand and on the left, so that they departed away on both sides.

"So went he to the elephant's feet, and got him under him, and slew him; then fell the elephant down upon him, and there he died."

It was believed among the ancient writers that the elephant worshipped the moon. Aelian* tells us that at the waxing of the moon elephants would gather long branches from the forest trees and in adoration would lift them up in their trunks as homage to the queen of night. Pliny, also, writes that "they have withall religious reverence; not only the starres and planets, but the sunne and moone they also worship, and in very truth writers there be who report thus much of

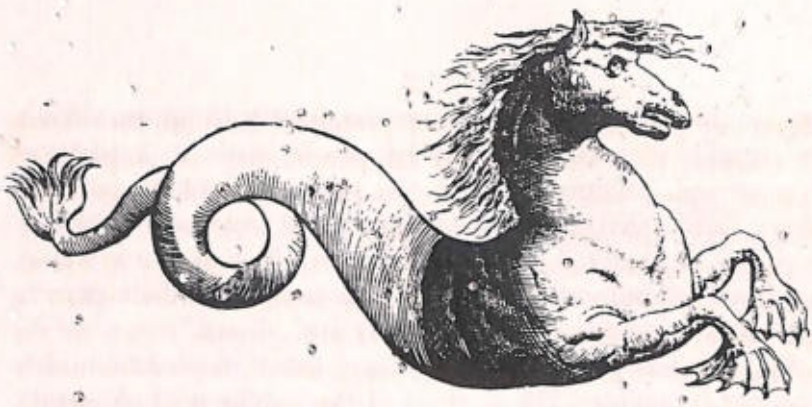
*_The Nature of Animals_, third century A.D.

them – that when the new moone beginneth to appeare fresh and bright, they come downe by whole herds to a certaine river named Amelus in the deserts and forests of Mauritania, where, after that they are washed and solemnlie purified by sprinkling and dashing themselves all over with water, and have saluted and adored after their manner their planet, they returne againe unto the woods and chases."

Aristotle has a good deal to say about elephants in his *Historia Animalium*. His account of the catching of elephants is succinct. "The chase of elephants is on this fashion. Men mount some of the tame and courageous elephants and pursue the herd. When they have come up with it they bid their own animals to beat the wild ones with their trunks, until they give in through faintness. Then the elephant-taker leaps on one of them and guides it with his weapon. After this it soon becomes mild and submissive. When the elephant-taker has mounted them, all are in subjection; but when he has dismounted some remain so, while others return to a wild state. While these are raging, they fetter with chains their front legs, in order that they may be quiet. Both small and great are thus captured."

In former times elephants were credited with extreme longevity. The normal span of their life was considered to be 400 years, if not shortened by sickness or accident. This great age seems to have been bestowed upon them as the result of an old legend regarding an elephant with a distinctive marking which was taken by a king of Lydia 400 years after a battle in which this particular animal had taken part. In point of fact Indian elephants may live to seventy years of age, but African elephants seldom exceed fifty.

Topsell informs us that "the Ivory or tooth is cold and dry in the first degree, and the whole substance thereof corroborateth the heart and helpeth conception; it is often adulterated by Fishes and Dogs bones burnt, and by white marble."



Sea Horse
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium Aquàtilium*]

The Hippopotamus or Sea Horse

'He thought he saw a Banker's Clerk
Descending from a bus;
He looked again and found it was
A hippopotamus.
"If this should stay to dine," he said,
"There won't be much for us!"
Lewis Carroll: Sylvie and Bruno

Until about the end of the eighteenth century little was known in Western Europe concerning the hippopotamus, and recorded descriptions are vague and curious. Sebastian Munster, misled by the ancient title of Horse of the Great River (i.e. the Nile), gives a strange drawing in his book, showing an animal with a horse's mane and hooves galloping through the water.

Sir Thomas Browne, in his pungent comments on the vulgar beliefs of his day, says: "As for Sea Horses . . . they are but Grotesco delineations which fill up empty spaces in Maps, and meer pictoriall inventions, not any Physicall shapes. That which the Ancients named Hippocampus is a little animal

about six inches long, and not preferred beyond the classis of Insects. That they termed Hippopotamus, an amphibious animall about the River Nile, so little resembleth an horse that, except the feet; it better makes out a swine."

Our forefathers were great believers in the efficacy of bloodletting, and Pliny tells us that the hippopotamus, when it has become outsized through overfeeding, goes down to the banks of the river and seeks out reeds which have been newly cut, and therefore are very sharp. With one of these it pierces one of the veins in the thigh and relieves the body from its congestion by this self-administered bloodletting. This done, it heals the wound by smearing it with Nile mud.

Pliny grants him a certain cunning, for he says: "When he sets forward to any field for his reliefe, hee goeth alwaies backward, and his tracts are seene leading from thence, to the end that against his return he should not be forelaid nor followed by his footing."

Strangely enough, the first hippopotamus to reach Western Europe did not make the journey until 1850, when Abbas Pasha of Egypt presented one to the London Zoo. This particular hippopotamus, named Obaysch, after an island in the White Nile where it was captured in 1849, was given such V.I.P. treatment on its journey to London as no hippo receives today. To provide it with milk and to transport it to Cairo, herds of camels were requisitioned. Special accommodation was arranged on the steamer which brought it to England, and a special train bore it to London, where the reception committee awaited its arrival.

In that fascinating book *The Golden Trade*, published in 1623, Richard Jobson, who was sent to the Gambia by the "Company of Merchant Adventurers of London trading into Africa," writes of the hippopotamus, which abounds in the river Gambia. Calling it the "sea-horse," he gives us the following picturesque description: "He is in fashion of body a compleat horse, as round buttock'd as a horse of service, and

in his whole body answerable; his head like unto a horse with short eares, but palpably appearing, which he wags and stirres as he shews himself, onely toward his mouth he growes broade downe like a Bull, and hath two teeth standing right before upon his lower choppe, which are great and dangerous."

The early Dutch settlers in Africa used to boil down the carcass of the hippopotamus and obtain from it as much as a ton of fat. But its chief monetary value lay in the excellent ivory of its teeth, which at one time was used by dentists to make false teeth.

Hyena devouring a human corpse
[*from a twelfth century bestiary*]

The False Hyena

Tis thus the false hyaena makes her moan
To draw the pitying traveller to her den.
Otway

The hyena is generally accepted as being the ghoul among beasts, "an hideous beast of horrible aspect . . . that feeds on women's flesh, as others feede on grass." And, moreover, as Topsell says, "a most subtill and crafty beast. And the female is far more subtill than the male, and therefore more seldome taken, for they are afraid of their own company."

The hyena was held to possess the power of imitating man's speech, and Pliny says that this animal, by listening to the voices of men conversing together, learns the name of one of them, and later, going to his hut by night, calls him by name in a feigned human voice, thus luring him to his death, for as

soon as he passed the door of his hut he was torn to pieces. Thus the hyena came to be looked upon as a symbol of deceitfulness and treachery.

As early as Aristotle it was commonly thought that the hyena changed its sex every year, or that each animal was both male and female. Even Topsell, who was as credulous as most of his contemporaries, found it hard to believe this, and writes: "I marvaile upon what occasion the writers have been so possessed with opinion that they change sexes, and are sometimes male and another female."

Nor was he inclined to believe, as many did, that the animal had a stone in its eye which, being placed under a man's tongue, endowed him with the gift of prophecy; "the truth hereof," he writes, "I leave to the reporters." Pliny tells us that "the gall of the hyena cures bleared eyes, if the forehead be anointed with it."

Another accepted belief is thus related by Topsell: "It hath been believed in ancient times that there is in this beast a magicall or enchanting power; for they write that about what creature soever he goeth round three times, it shall stand stone-still and not be able to moove out of the place; and if Dogs do but come within the compasse of their shaddow and touch it, they presently lose their voice; and that this she doeth most naturally in the ful moone; for although the swiftnesse or other opportunity of the Dogges helpeth them to fly away from her, yet if she can but cast her shadow upon them she easily obtaineth her prey."

He continues: "If a man meet with this beast he must not set upon it on the right hand, but on the lefte, for it hath been often seene that when in hast it did run by the Hunter on the right hand, he presently fel off from his horse senceless; and therefore they that secure themselves from this beast must be carefull to receive him on the left side, that so hee may with more facility be taken, especially (saith Pliny) if the cords wherein he is to be ensnared be fastened with seven knots." The number seven has from time immemorial

been considered a magic number, possibly on account of the seven days needed for the creation of the world. The old astrologers and alchemists recognized seven planets, each with its own heaven.

Galen, one of the most famous physicians of antiquity, is said to have recommended "Hyaena sod in Oyle" as a fomentation for those afflicted with lameness, "for it hath such power to evacuate and draw forth whatsoever evill humour aboundeth in the body of man, that it leaveth nothing hurtfull behinde." Topsell has two folio pages devoted entirely to the medicinal uses of the hyena. From Pliny he takes the following: "The Hyena's flesh being eaten doth much avail against the bitings of ravenous Dogs; but some are of opinion that the liver being only eaten is of more force and power to cure or heal them. The nerves or sinews of a Hyena being beaten to small powder and dried and mingled with Frankincense, together, and so drunk, doth restore fertility and plenty of seed in that woman which before was barren." Democritus, he says, affirms that the marrow of a hyena, "being bound unto the back of either man or woman who are troubled with vain phantasies or dreams in their sleep, doth very speedily and very effectually help them." Albertus, by the way, says the same of the hyena's tooth.

Rasis* is quoted by Topsell as saying that "the flesh of the *Alzabo* [hyena] being baked with Oyl doth very much help either men or women which have their feet Gowty." And Dioscorides† assures us that "the genital of a male Hyena dryed and beaten to powder, being mingled with a certain perfume, doth cure and help those which are troubled with the Cramp," and according to Marcellus,‡ "the bladder of a Hyena being drunk in Wine is a good remedy against incontinency of urine."

*Ahmad Ibn Muhammad, called Rasis, an Arabian physician.

† Dioscorides, a Greek physician (*fl. c.* 50 A.D.) who served in the army of Nero and wrote a celebrated *Materia Medica*.

‡ Marcellus Empiricus (*fl. c.* 380 A.D.), author of *De medicamentis* and physician to the emperor Theodosius.

Leopards and Their Kind

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?
Jeremiah XIII, 23

If he cannot change his spots, the leopard is not so constant with regard to his name, for as George Jennison remarks,* "surely so many animals have never been confused with one another as under the name 'leopard'. The leopard, puma, serval, cheetah, lynx, caracal, and ounce overlap in endless confusion; the puma and the jaguar are given the names lion, tiger, panther, or painter, and are sometimes mistaken for the ocelot, and the leopard itself has been known as spotted tiger, panther, and pard. The Herald's Office even fails to distinguish the leopard and the lion."

Topsell found the same difficulty in his day, for, writing about "The Panther, commonly called a Pardal, a Leopard, and a Libbard," he says: "There have beene so many names devised for this one beast, that it is growen a difficult thing, either to make a good reconciliation of the authors which are wed to their several opinions, or else to define it perfectly and make of him a good methodical History."

Pard or panther were names once given to the leopard (*Felis pardus*), of which there are many varieties. The word "panther," though scientifically meaningless nowadays, is often applied to the black or melanistic leopard.

The confusion seems to have arisen from errors committed by the ancient Romans. The name of leopard was given by the ancients to an animal which they supposed to be a cross between a lion and a pard, or panther. Things had become even more confused by Topsell's day, for he tells us that the panther is the female and the pard the male. "When the Lion

*Noah's Cargo.

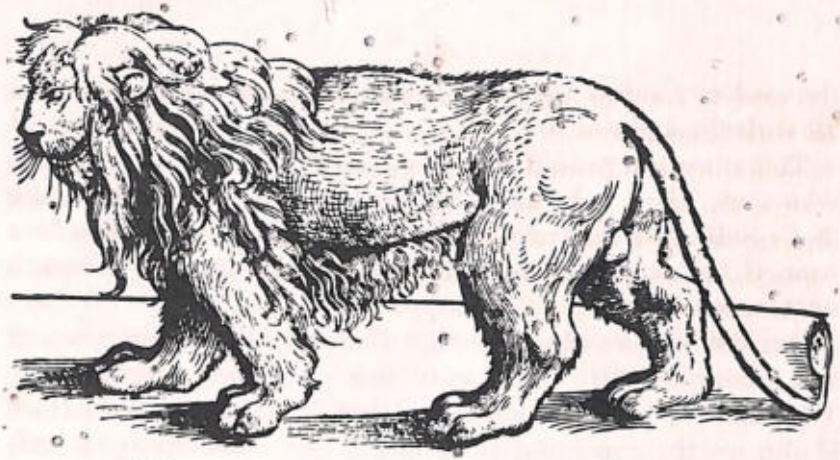
covereth the Pardal," he writes, "then is the whelp called a leopard or libbard; but when the Pardal covereth the lioness, that it is called a Panther." To confuse matters still further, Topsell continues: "The Pardal is a fierce and cruell beast very violent, having a body and mind like ravening birds, and some say they are ingendered now and then betwixt dogs and panthers, or betwixt leopards and dogges, even as the Lycopanthers are ingendred betwixt wolves and panthers." Today we know better, but all the same we have retained for *Felis pardus* the rather meaningless word "leo-pard," or lion panther.

According to the same writer, the leopard, "whensoever it is sicke it thirsteth after the blood of a wilde cat, and recovereth by sucking that blood, or else by eating the dung of a man. Above all other things it delighteth in the Camphorey tree, and therefore lieth underneath it, to keepe it from spoile, and in like sort the panther delighteth in sweet gums and spices, and therefore no marvel if they cannot abide garlicke, because it annoyeth their sence of smelling. And it is reported by St. Ambrose that if the wals of ones howse or sheep-coate be anointed with the juice of garlicke, both panthers and leopards will run away from it."

Just as there was said to be a mortal enmity between the lion and the unicorn, so, according to Topsell, "there is great hatred and enmity between the hyaena and the panther, for in the presence of the hyaena the Pardal dare not resist; and if there be a piece of a hyaena's skin about either man or beast, the panther will never touch it; and if their skins after they be dead be hung up in the presence of one another, the hair will fall off from the panther. If anything be anointed with broth wherin a cock hath been sodden, neither panthers nor lions will ever touch it." It really is astonishing how long writers on natural history were perfectly content to repeat, without ever troubling to verify them by experience, the conjectures of writers who lived centuries before them.

Porta, in his *Natural Magick*, speaks also of the lycopanther, or thoes, engendered by the coupling of panther and wolf, copying, as did Topsell, from Oppian.* The skin of the thoes, writes Porta, is very hard, "and is meddled with both their shapes; skinned like a panther and headed like a wolf."

*A native of Apamea in Syria, who in the third century B.C. wrote a didactic poem on hunting called *Cynegetica*.



Lion
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

His Majesty the Lion

"The princely lion, king of forrest-kings,
And chiefe commaunder of the wildernesse.
Chester: Love's Martyr

Herodotus, Aristotle and Pliny are all of the opinion that lions were once found in Europe, chiefly in that area we now term the Balkans, though Pliny is more precise and limits them to an area between the rivers Achelous and Nestus. The ancient writers all have many marvellous stories concerning the king of beasts, not all of which redound to the animal's credit. For instance, Pliny says: "Lions are nothing at all crafty and fraudulent, neither be they suspitious. They never look askew but alwaies cast their eye directly forward, and they love not that any man should in that sort look side-long upon them. This creature, so noble as hee is, and withall so cruel and fell, trembleth and quaketh to heare the noise of cart-wheeles, or to see them turn about; nay he cannot abide of all things Chariots when they be void and empty; frighted he is with

the cockes combe, and his crowing much more, but most of all with the sight of fire."

This story is repeated with some slight variations by Topsell, who says, "the Cocke also both seene and heard for his voice and combe, is a terror to the Lion and Basiliske, and the Lion runneth from him when he seeth him, especially from a white cocke."

Ancient writers observed that the lion killed only when it was hungry. With reference to this presumed magnanimity, Topsell says, "their clemencie in that fierce and angry nature is also worthy commendation, and to be wondered at in such beastes, for if one prostrate himselfe unto them as it were in petition for his life they often spare except in extremities of famine; and likewise they seldome destroy women or children; and if they see women, children and men together, they take the men which are strongest and refuse the others as weaklings."

On account of the reputation for strength and courage enjoyed by the lion, it was thought that a similar virtue could be man's if it were possible for him to eat the lion's flesh. but the ancient writers affirm that lion's is the most heating of all meat, very heavy and difficult of digestion, and more than likely to induce the colic.

Bartholomew Glanville, writing between 1260 and 1270, says: "It is the kind of lions not to be wroth with man, but if they be grieved or hurt. Also their mercy is known by many and oft examples: for they suffer them to pass homeward that were prisoners and come out of thraldom."

This is the manner in which lions were captured, according to this same Bartholomew: "One double cave is made one fast by that other, and in the second cave is set a whiche [wicket gate], that closeth full soon when it is touched: and in the first den and cave is a lamb set, and the lion leapeth therein, when he is an hungered, for to take the lamb. And when he seeth that he may not break out of the den, he is ashamed that he is beguiled, and would enter in to the second

den to lurk there, and falleth into it, and it closeth anon as he is in, and letteth him not pass out thereof, but keepeth him fast therein, until he be taken out and bound with chains till he be tame."

The lion had one dreadful enemy, according to Pliny, and that was the leontophontes. "If its flesh is only tasted by the lion," he writes, "so intensely venomous is its nature that this lord of the other quadrupeds instantly expires." Accordingly, hunters, we are told, used to burn the body of the leontophontes and sprinkle the ash over a piece of flesh placed in the lion's path. If the lion ate it, the result was fatal. So, says Pliny, "the Lion therefore, not without reason, hates the Leontophontes, and, after destroying its sight, kills it without inflicting a bite: the animal, on the other hand, sprinkles the Lion with its urine, being well aware that this, too, is fatal to it." Just what the leontophontes was we have no means of knowing. Ulisse Aldrovandi suggests that they may have been insects or plants.

As with most other animals, parts of the lion were formerly accounted of great therapeutic value. Thus, "the greace of a lyon being dissolved and presently againe conglutinated together and so being annointed uppon the body of those whc are heavy and sadde, it will speedily extirpate all sorrow and griefe from their heartes." Also, "if the eyeteeth of a Lyon be hung about the necke of a young childe before that he cast his teeth and the beginning of his second or new teeth, they will keep him for ever from having any ache or paine in them." In view of the difficulty of procuring the panacea, it seems unlikely that the barber-dentists of the day were unduly disturbed.

The enmity between the lion and the unicorn is one of the oldest concepts in mythology (see the couplet at the top of page 76). The ruse employed by the lion when attacked by the unicorn is described by Spenser in his *Fairie Queene*. The lion, when it sees the unicorn preparing to charge, stands in front of a tree, then leaps quickly aside as its enemy

thunders past and, unable to check its speed, strikes its horn so violently into the tree trunk that it cannot release itself, and becomes the unwilling victim of its antagonist.

In the olden days a few lions were kept in the Tower of London to afford entertainment to the court, for lions being costly animals, lion-baiting was a sport reserved for royalty. Lions as pets have frequently been recorded from the time of Rameses the Great, the Egyptian pharaoh whose lion companion, Anta-m-Nekht, wrought confusion among the Hittites. Caligula had a tame lion which he called Acinaces (the scimitar) because it could so swiftly cut a man off from life. Mark Antony is said to have driven a pair of tame lions in Rome, and Hanno, the Carthaginian general, had one as a pet.

The *Hortus Sanitatis,* printed by Jacob Meydenbach at Mainz in 1491, though in part a botanical work, also contains treatises on animals, birds and fishes. It says: "The Lion has a strong smell and especially in the mouth. When he sleeps in a ship the ship is in danger. The Lion flees before a mouse and is afraid of the wood which is called sethin. Hellebore, too, and squill kill dogs and lions and many wild beasts." Although Gerard tells us that "a purgation of Hellebor is good for mad and furious men," he omits to state that it is lethal for lions. Both *Helleborus viridis* and *Helleborus foetidus* are drastic purgatives, but unlikely to do more than make the lion feel uncomfortable. As for squills, although an entire treatise was written by Pliny extolling their magical virtues, lion-killing does not rate a mention.

Shakespeare adopted the popular view of the lion's noble qualities, including its magnanimity, as when Troilus exclaims to Hector:

> Brother, you have a vice of mercy in you
> Which better fits a lion than a man.

In *Richard II* the Queen tries to inspire her consort to some nobility of action with the following words:

Hath Bolingbroke depos'd
Thine intellect? Hath he been in thy heart?
The lion dying thrusteth forth his paw,
And wounds the earth, if nothing else, with rage,
To be o'erpowered; and wilt thou, pupil-like
Take thy correction mildly, kiss the rod,
And fawn on rage with base humility,
Which art a lion and a king of beasts?

The chronicler Ralph Holinshed has a rather curious passage in his description of England in which he writes: "Lions we have had very many in the North parts of Scotland, and those with manes of no less force than those of Mauretania; but how and when they were destroyed as yet I do not read." If the almost total disappearance of the lion from India is something of a mystery, its appearance at all in Scotland would be an even greater one.

Anecdotes about lions are numerous, of which probably the best known is the tale of Androcles and the Lion, a fable of unknown antiquity stressing the benefit derived from a kind action. The runaway slave Androcles took refuge in a cave in which he came face to face with a lion. The beast, instead of attacking him, held up its forepaw, mutely begging the slave to extract from it a large thorn. The slave was afterwards captured and condemned to fight with a lion in the Roman arena. It happened that the lion loosed against him was the one he had befriended, and the animal, recognizing its benefactor, instead of attacking him, demonstrated its affection and gratitude.

Another legendary story of the lion, related by Neckham, is a variation on the same theme. A knight of noble blood, travelling alone, heard the roars and groans of a lion, and seeking the cause, found the lion in the coils of an enormous serpent. He drew his sword and killed the serpent. Freed from danger, the lion showed the knight every mark of gratitude, refusing to leave his side, and keeping watch at

night while his master slept. In the heat of battle he aided the knight and more than once repaid the saving of his own life by saving that of the knight in turn. But after a time the knight grew weary of the lion's constant attention and determined to give him the slip. So when the time came for the knight to return to his native land, he stole away quietly one day while the lion was asleep and boarded the waiting ship. When the lion awoke he rushed to the shore, only to see the sails of the knight's ship growing smaller in the distance. With a roar of anguish he plunged into the sea, but Neptune, angered at the beast's audacity, summoned up a storm which drowned the poor animal.

The lion is one of the most famous of all heraldic symbols, and one of the oldest armorial seals known of a royal prince bears the rampant lion of Flanders. The science of heraldry, which sprang up in the Middle Ages, is a mass of conventions, and by custom the royal beast is always shown as "rampant" – that is, side-face, touching the ground with one foot only, with mouth open, claws fully extended, tail lashing, all in a noble rage; for this was thought to be the proper stance for the king of beasts. But another characteristic of the lion was considered to be its crouching gait as it stalked its prey; so to show this aspect of its nature the old armourists drew it as a long, crouching animal walking on three feet with one forepaw raised and the head turned towards the spectator in an attitude known as "regardant." But when they drew him in that attitude the old armourists termed the beast a leopard. Their knowledge of natural history was slight. Although some early writers on armoury pointed out that a lion did not become a leopard just by turning its head sidelong, the convention remained and what we would now term the English "lion" was in the Middle Ages the "leopard." Henry V's herald was known, from his master's coat-armour, as Leopard Herald.

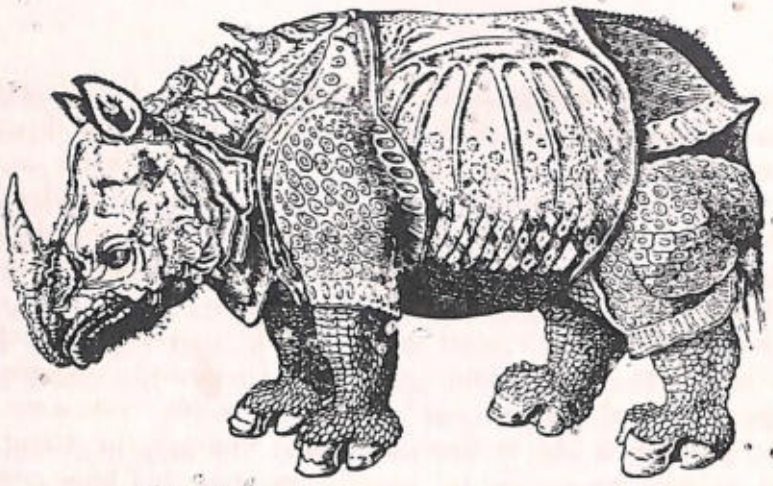
"A leopard of England," writes E. E. Dorling,* "is a golden

*Leopards of England, 1912.

lion walking and full-faced on a red field; and for more than seven centuries three such beasts have been the recognized bearings of the English kings . . . since the days of that great and vigorous house of Anjou, which gave so many sovereigns to England, the three golden leopards have marched in their shield as the heraldic symbol of our kings." The king's banner which flew over the battlefield of Crécy bore the device known to later armourists as "Gules three lions passant regardant in pale or," but which contemporary chroniclers described as "Gules with three leopards of gold."

The lion was a charge not confined to the king alone, but was borne in olden days by many noble families. Simon de Montfort bore "Gules a silver lion with a forked tail"; Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, "Gules, a lion gold"; and Marmion "Gules a lion vair."

The old writers on heraldry thought highly of the lion, which, writes Ferne in his *Blazon of Gentry* (1586), "is the most worthiest of all beastes; yea, he standeth as the king, and is feared above all the beastes of the fielde. So that by the Lyon is signified principailitie, dominion and rule. Fortitude and magnanimity is denoted in the Lyon." Gerard Leigh, author of *Accedens of Armorie* (1562), a book which ran into many editions, informs us that when lions are born "they sleepe continually three long Egyptian dayes. Whereat the Lyonesse, making such terrible roring as the erth trembleth therewith, raiseth them by force thereof out of that deadlie sleepe, ministering foode, which of sleepe before they could not take. Aristotle writeth that in his marching he setteth foorth his right paw first, and beareth in himselfe a princelie port. . . . There is little marrow in his bones, for when they are smitten together fier flieth out of them as from a flint stone. Therefore in the olde time they made shields for horsemen of Lyons bones."



Rhinoceros
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

The Armed Rhinoceros

> Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
> The armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;
> Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
> Shall never tremble.
>
> *Shakespeare: Macbeth*

In England, until fairly late, the rhinoceros was counted among the fabulous beasts, for although it had been seen in the Roman circus during the period of the later Empire, many centuries passed before it was ever seen beyond the Channel. Topsell calls it "the second wonder in nature," and adds, "as the beast is strange and never seene in our countrey, so my eye-sight cannot adde any thing to the description."

The rhinoceros is a true unicorn if we take the literal meaning of that word, and Marco Polo, speaking of the numerous unicorns to be found in Java the Less (i.e. Sumatra), is evidently describing the rhinoceros. "The head resembles that of a wild boar," he writes, "and they carry it ever bent towards

the ground. They delight much to abide in mire and mud. 'Tis a passing ugly beast to look upon, and is not in the least like that which our stories tell us as being caught in the lap of a virgin." He alludes, of course, to the commonly received story of the legendary unicorn delighting to lay its head in the lap of a virgin and thus suffering itself to be captured by the hunter (see page 78).

"That there is such a beast in the world," writes Topsell of the rhinoceros, "both Pliny, Solinus, Diodorus, Aelianus, Lampridius, and others, doe yeald erefrigable testimony. Heliogabalus had one of them at Rome. Pompey the Great, in his publike spectacles did likewise produce a Rhinocerot (as Seneca writeth). When Augustus rode triumphing for Cleopatra, he brought forth to the people a sea-horse and a Rhinocerot, which was the first time that ever a Rhinocerot was seene at Rome. Martiall also celebrateth an excellent epigram of a Rhinocerot which in the presence of Caesar Domitian did cast up a Bull into the aire with his horne, as if he had bin a tenyce ball. Lastly, to put it out of question that there is such a beast as this Rhinocerot, the picture and figure here expressed was taken by Gesner from the beast alive at Lysbon in Portugal before many witnesses."

Here Topsell is in error, for the woodcut of a rhinoceros which he includes in his *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes,* copied from the one in Gesner's *Historia Animalium,* was originally drawn by Albrecht Dürer before Gesner was born.

According to George Jennison (*Noah's Cargo*), tame rhinoceroses have been kept by Eastern princes for some thousands of years, and shown as emblems of royal power. "In 1398," he writes, "rhinoceroses and elephants were made to bow down before Timor, the conqueror of Delhi. They were taught to carry a howdah like the elephant, or, like so many other creatures, were set to fight for the royal pleasure, being painted in distinctive colours that the wagerers might follow more easily the fortunes of their champion."

Ulisse Aldrovandi in his *Natural History* has a woodcut of a two-horned African rhinoceros, with a collar round its neck. This may have been the one which was shown at Constantinople towards the end of the sixteenth century, for that was described as wearing a leather collar.

The horn of almost any exotic animal was credited with the power of discerning the presence of poison in liquor, a superstition which was fostered and encouraged by Arab traders who made large profits from the credulity of their customers. Indian princes not only believed in the power of the rhinoceros horn as an antidote to poison, but thought that to drink from a cup made of that animal's horn conferred immunity from sickness.

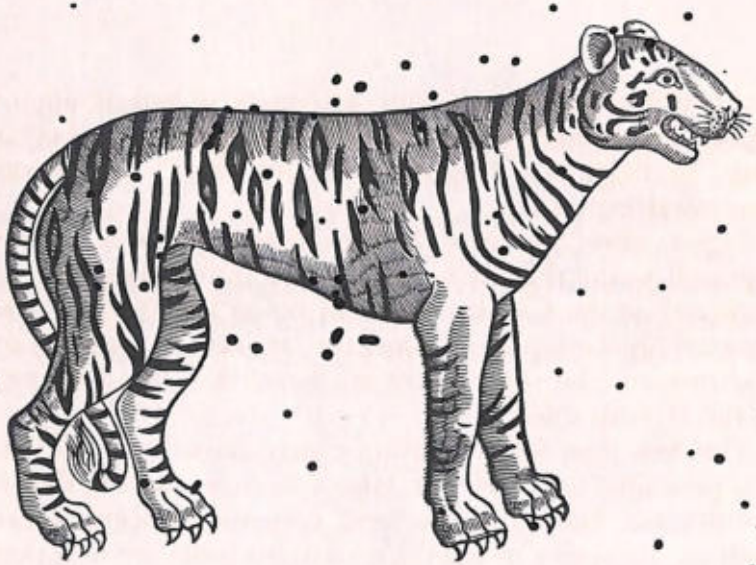
Both the *monoceros* of the later Greeks and the *unicornis* of the Romans were undoubtedly the rhinoceros; but the unicorn described by the earlier Greek authors, such as Ctesias (fourth century B.C.) seems to have been a composite figure made up of several animals, one of which appears to have been the onager, or wild ass of Asia.

Oppian declared that there was no distinction of sexes in the rhinoceros, and that all were males. This unnatural assertion Topsell discredits, saying, "from hence let nobody gather that there are no females, for it were impossible that the breede should continue without females."

"When they are to fight," he tells us, "they whet their horne upon a stone, and there is not only a discord between these beasts and Elephants for their food, but a naturall description and enmity: for it is confidently affirmed that when the Rhinocerot which was at Lisborne was brought into the presence of an Elephant, the Elephant ran away from him." This was that celebrated rhinoceros sent from India in 1513 as a present to the king of Portugal.

The rhinoceros depicted by Dürer has one horn; that shown in Aldrovandi has two. That is not an error on the part of either artist, for some of the smaller rhinos of Indonesia have

two horns, whereas other species have only one. The Javan one-horned rhino, *Rhonoceros sondaicus,* is one of the rarest of the great land mammals and is smaller than the one-horned rhino of India, *Rhonoceros unicornis.* The Javan rhinoceros was at one time found over a fairly wide area of tropical Asia, but was hunted almost out of existence in the nineteenth century, largely owing to the fact that great sums were offered for the horn on account of its legendary therapeutic value.



Tiger
[Topsell: *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes,* 1607]

The Ferocious Tiger

The time and my intents are savage-wild;
More fierce, and more inexorable far,
Than empty tigers, or the roaring sea.
Shakespeare: Romeo & Juliet

"They ingender as Lyons do," writes Topsell, "and therefore I marvell how the fable first came uppe, that they were all females and had no males among them, and that the females conceived with young by the West Wind." A strange fable, indeed, and Topsell explains it by the fact that the male was seldom captured, for when he saw a man he ran away and left his mate to protect the cubs. "For this occasion," says Topsell, "I thinke that the fable first came up that there were no males among tigers."

The tiger has always had an evil reputation as an animal

both ruthless and treacherous. His mate is looked upon with slightly less hatred, for at least she is so devoted to her young that "to fight like a tigress for her cubs" has become a proverbial expression.

Tigers were no rarity in the Roman circuses, and were captured in the regions to the west of India. Hyrcania, which bordered on the Caspian Sea, was noted for tigers of extreme ferocity. Macbeth places among the beasts most likely to arouse fear in man "the rugged Russian bear, the armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger."

The first tiger seen in Europe may have been that which was presented to the city of Athens by Seleucus I in the fourth century B.C. Indeed tigers were very rarely seen in Europe until the discovery of the Cape route to India made it possible to transport them by sea. For that reason the early writers on natural history knew little about them, and supplemented their want of knowledge by such absurd beliefs as that the whiskers of the tiger are poisonous. In the 1616 edition of *Purchas his Pilgrims* we read: "The Tiger is as fierce and cruel as Lions, making prey of man and beast, yet rather devouring black men than white; whose mustachios are holden for mortal poison, and, being given in meats, cause men to die mad."

Bartholomew Glanville has a delightful account of how the hunters managed to capture the tigress' cubs. "He that will bear away the whelps leaveth in the way great mirrors, and the mother followeth and findeth the mirrors in the way, and looketh upon them, and seeth her own shadow and image therein, and weeneth that she seeth her children therein, and is long occupied therefore to deliver her children out of the glass, and so the hunter hath time and space for to escape." This little story the good monk seems to have taken from Pliny, and in those days no one would have dreamt of challenging the authority of the ancient writers.

It is said that the infamous Nero cherished one thing only — a tigress to which he gave the name of Phoebe. It was one of a

convoy of ferocious animals sent to Rome from Africa to be used in the circuses. It was in the Colosseum at Rome that Nero first set eyes on the animal, which caused more havoc than three other tigers renowned for their strength and ferocity. Nero had a golden cage built for this tigress in the grounds of his palace, and entrusted the training of it to one of those men who made a living out of taming wild animals and were called *mansuetarii*. Like Phoebe he came from Africa and his name was Lybicus. Soon afterwards Nero could be seen seated on his throne with the tigress lying at his feet, and woe to any who should offend Phoebe. Rather than lose his tigress he would have consented to the loss of one of his richest provinces.

It seems fairly certain that tigers were not as familiar to the ancient writers of the West as was the lion, though Petronius in the *Satyricon* mentions that tigers were set upon criminals condemned to be thrown to wild beasts.

In Asia, of course, it was a different matter. As the most dangerous beast of prey in that continent, it took its place in Eastern legend and mythology as a chastising demon or a god of retribution. In the Indian mythology, says Jennison,* "the lion springs nobly from the nose of Indra; the tiger, chief of a host of ignoble beasts, comes from the lower extremity."

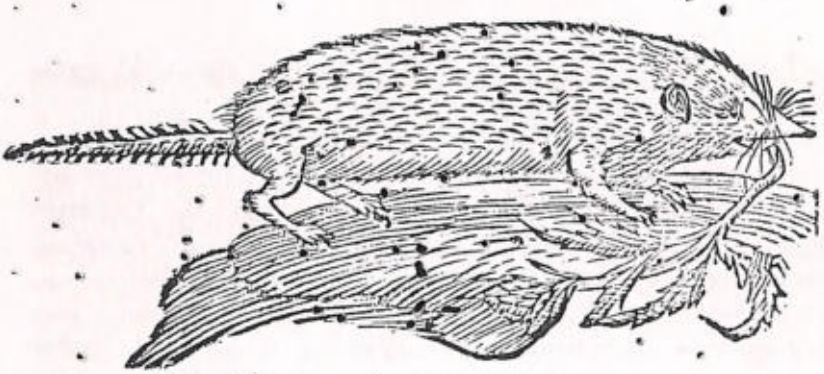
Marco Polo encountered tigers during the course of his journey in the Far East, though on occasion he seems to become slightly mixed in his zoology. Speaking of the menagerie of the Great Khan he writes: "It is full of leopards trained to hunt and retrieve game. Also there are many trained wolves which are all good for the chase. Furthermore there are several lions, larger than those of Babylon, beautifully marked, for their body is marked with long stripes of black and white." It is quite clear that he was speaking of the tiger, and not of the lion.

From his narrative it appears that the tigers were taken to

*Noah's Cargo.

the hunt in carts and then loosed against the wild game collected by the beaters.

Although lions were numerous in the zoological collections of Western Europe during the Middle Ages, tigers were exceedingly rare and were seldom seen outside the Ottoman Empire. The sultans always had some on show at Constantinople, and they were trained to give exhibitions before important visitors. "The beast-masters," writes Jennison, "recognizing how dangerous they might be even when under control, provided them with bells that warned the passer-by to give them a wide berth; Victorius mentions one that was so unruly that it was always dosed with mandrake or opium and moved while dazed and stupified by the drug."



Shrew-Mouse
[Aldrovandi: *History of Quadrupeds*]

The Malicious Shrew-Mouse

> A Shrew-mous quasi shrewd mouse, which by biting cattle so venometh them that they die, whereof came our English "I beshrew thee" when we wish ill.
>
> *Minsheu: Dictionary*

The common shrew of Britain, that tiny mouse-like creature with a pointed snout, is a most inoffensive creature, except perhaps to the insects on which it lives. Yet to our ancestors it appeared otherwise. Its bite was considered as venomous as that of a snake, and any contact with a shrew was held to be extremely dangerous. Listen to Topsell on the subject: "It is a ravening beast," he writes, "feigning itself gentle and tame, but being touched it biteth deep and poysoneth deadly. It beareth a cruel mind, desiring to hunt anything, neither is there any creature that it loveth."

This idea was apparently not peculiar to Britain; the Romans were equally convinced that the shrew was a venomous animal. John Swan, the author of the *Speculum Mundi*, tells

us that in Latin it is called *Mus araneus*, "because it containeth in it poison or venime like a Spider, and if at any time it bite either man or beast the truth of this will be too apparent. But commonly it is called a Shrew-mouse, and from the venimous biting of this beast we have an English imprecation, 'I beshrew thee', in which words we do, indeed, wish some such evil. And again, because a curst scold or a brawling wife is esteemed none of the least evils; we therefore call such a one a Shrew."

Cattle and horses, when suffering from any sickness which seemed to cause a numbness of the legs, were thought to have been bitten by a shrew, and for this there was only one antidote. In Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* you will come across the following passage: "A shrew-ash is an ash whose twigs or branches when gently applied to the limbs of cattle will immediately relieve the pain which a beast suffers from the running of a shrew-mouse over the part affected. Against this accident, to which they were continually liable, our provident forefathers always kept a shrew-ash at hand, which when once medicated would maintain its virtue for ever."

This, however, is not the whole of the story, for in order to make a shrew-ash, a hole was bored in the trunk of an ash tree, and an unfortunate shrew-mouse was immured within it to the accompaniment of certain magical rites, and so left to die. There was a time, when superstition was still rife throughout Europe, when almost every quiet country village had its own shrew-ash.

Among the many remedies culled from the ancient writers by Topsell we read: "The root of a white or black thistle, being beaten and given in drink doth very effectually help or cure those which are bitten by a shrew." Also, "the genital of a Lamb or Kid being mingled with four drams of the Herb called *Aristolochia* or Hart-wort, and six drams of the sweetish Myrrh, is very good and medicinable for curing of those which

are bitten or stung with Shrews, Scorpions, and such like venemous Beasts."

From Pliny he takes the following instructions as to how cattle should be preserved from the bite of the shrew. "Compass the hole wherin she lyeth round about, and get her out alive, and keep her so till she dye and waxe stiffe; then hang her about the neck of the Beast which you would preserve, and there will not any Shrew come near them; and this is accounted to be most certain."

Marcellus finds the shrew useful as a remedy for piles. "The shrew which falling by chance into a cart-road or track, doth die upon the same, being burned and afterwards beaten or dissolved into dust, and mingled with goose grease, being rubbed or anointed upon those which suffer with the swelling in the fundament, doth bring unto them a wonderful and most admirable cure and remedy."

According to Hippocrates, "the tail of a shrew being cut off and burned, and afterwards beaten into dust and applied or anointed upon the sore of any man which came by the biting of a greedy or ravenous Dog will in very short space make them both whole and sound, so that the tail be cut from the Shrew when she is alive, not when she is dead, for then it hath neither good operation nor efficacy in it."

Winged Horse
[Petiscus: *Der Olymp*, 1823]

The Winged Horse and Others

Turn and wind a fiery pegasus
And watch the world with noble horsemanship.
Shakespeare: *Henry* IV, *Part* I

One of the most delightful of the poetic creations of the ancients is the legend of the winged horse captured by Bellerophon. He was assisted by Athene, who taught him how to tame and ride it. The story goes that Bellerophon, the son of Glaucus, found Pegasus drinking at the spring of Pirene, on the Acropolis of Corinth, and threw over his head a golden bridle, the present of Athene. Mounted on Pegasus, Bellerophon overcame the Chimera and destroyed the monster by rising above her in the air and riddling her with arrows.

Bellerophon later incurred the wrath of the gods by trying to reach Olympus on his horse, as though he were an immortal.

The outraged Zeus sent a gadfly to sting the horse, which threw its rider, who fell to earth. Pegasus, however, completed the flight to Olympus and was thereafter made to draw the thunder-chariot of the father of the gods.

Pegasus is the steed of the Muses. When these daughters of Mnemosyne contended in song with the presumptuous daughters of Pierus, "Helicon rose heavenward with delight," but Pegasus gave it a kick which arrested its rise and there gushed out of the mountain "the soul-inspiring water of Hippocrene."

The horse seems to have been unknown to the ancient Egyptians; it is not shown on the most ancient monuments of that country. Chabas says that all we can prudently conclude from this is that the horse, together with the camel, were far from numerous in the time of the ancient empires and for that reason were not counted among the domestic animals.

Apart from Pegasus, there were other mythical horses such as the brazen-footed horses of Aeëtes, brother of Circe, which it was necessary for one who would bear off the Golden Fleece to yoke to a plough and compel to work. Castor and Pollux also owned a famous horse called Cyllarus, and on a coin of Rhegium they are shown mounted on him, somewhat after the manner of the Knights Templars of later times, as depicted on their seal.

Nor must we forget the mares of Glaucus of Potniae. This son of Sisyphus and Merope (and, incidentally, father of Bellerophon) would not let his mares breed, hoping thereby to make them more spirited for the chariot races in which he loved to take part. At this, Aphrodite grew angry and led the mares by night to drink from a certain well sacred to herself and to graze on a strange herb which grew close by. The mares went mad, and when Glaucus harnessed them to his chariot they bolted, overturning the chariot, and Glaucus, caught in the reins, was dragged the whole length

of the stadium. Finally the enraged mares tore him limb from limb and devoured him.

The two horses of Achilles' chariot, Xanthus and Balius, flew like the wind, according to Homer, and he tells us, also, in the *Iliad*, that they were the offspring of the West Wind and Podarga, one of the Harpies. Hera gave Xanthus the power of speech, which it used to prophecy its master's speedy death.

Topsell illustrates the love of horses for their masters, for, he writes, "Homer seemeth also to affirme that there are in Horses divine qualityes, understanding things to come, for being tyed to their mangers they mourned for the death of Patroclus, and also foreshewed Achilles what should happen to him; for which cause Pliny saieth of them that they lament their lost maisters with teares, and foreknow battailes. Accursius affirmeth that Caesar, three daies before he died, found his ambling Nag weeping in the stable, which was a token of his ensewing death, which thing I should not believe except Tranquillus, in the life of Caesar, had related the same thing and he addeth, moreover, that the Horses which were consecrated to Mars for passing over Rubicon, being let to run wilde abroad, without their maisters, because no man might meddle with the horses of the Gods, were found to weepe abundantly, and to abstaine from all meat."

As an example of the queer superstitions prevalent in Topsell's day, he writes: "The Marrow of a horse is very good to loosen the sinewes which are knit and fastened together, but first let it be boiled in wine, and afterwards be made cold, and then anointed warmly either by the Fire or Sun. The teeth of a male horse not gelded, or by any labor made feeble, being put under the head, or over the head of him that is troubled or starteth in his dreame, doth withstand and resist all unquietnes which in the time of his rest might happen unto him. The teeth also of a horse is verye profitable for the curing of the Cilblanes which are rotten and full of

corruption when they are swollen full ripe. The teeth which do, first of all, fall from horses, being bound or fastned upon children in their infancie, do very easily procure the breeding of the teeth, but with more speed, and more effectually, if they have never touched the ground.

"The foame of a horse is also very much commended for them which have either paine or difficulty of hearing in their ears, or else the dust of horse dung, being new made and dryed, and mingled with oyle of Roses. The griefe or soreness of a man's mouth or throat, being washed or annointed with the foame of a Horse which hath bin fed with Oates or barly, doth presently expell the paine of the Soreness, if so be that it be 2 or 3 times washed over with the juyce of young or green Sea-crabs beaten small together."

One of history's immortal horses is the famed Bucephalus, owned by Alexander the Great. Plutarch tells us that when it was offered for sale to Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon, it was found to be so wild and unmanageable that Philip refused to own it, but Alexander managed to tame it. When he had dismounted, his father exclaimed, embracing him, "O son! thou must needs have a realm that is meet for thee, for Macedon will not hold thee." And so it was Bucephalus that carried Alexander on his historic campaigns into Syria, Persia and India. So great was the affection existing between horse and rider that when Bucephalus died in India, at the age of thirty years, Alexander founded the city of Bucephala in northern India in its memory.

The Romans took far less interest in horses than did the Greeks. Their armies were almost entirely composed of infantry, and when they did use cavalry that branch of the service was made up of foreign elements — Numidians, Gauls and Spaniards. The earliest Roman armies made limited use of cavalry, the riders being generally drawn from the richest classes, but the purely Roman cavalry disappeared during the second century B.C. Indeed, one of the contributory causes of the collapse of the western Roman Empire was this very

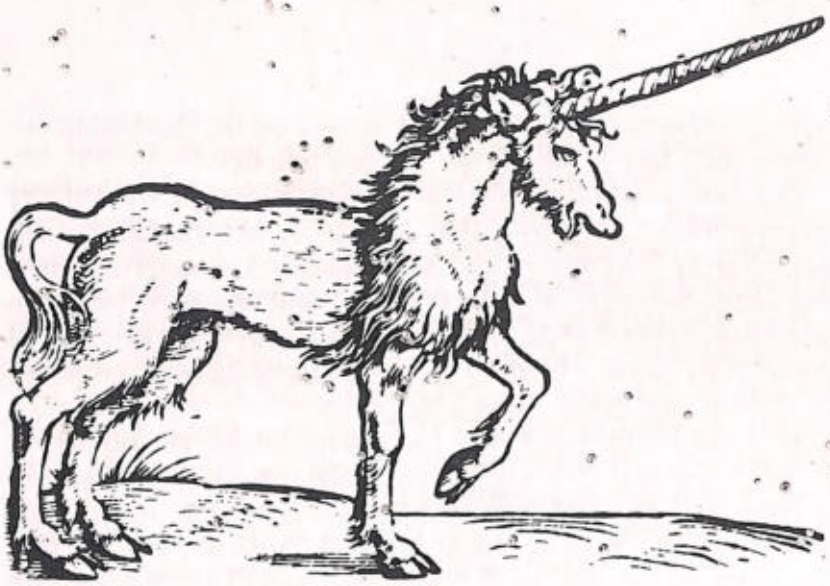
lack of cavalry, for the mounted troops of the barbarian invaders took heavy toll of the Roman infantry.

The most celebrated horse in Roman history is that of the emperor Gaius Caligula. This animal, called Incitatus, had, according to Suetonius, a stable of marble, a manger of ivory, and also a house filled with furniture and slaves, in order to provide suitable entertainment for the guests whom he would invite in its name. The story goes that Caligula even proposed to make his favourite horse a consul!

Whereas Pegasus is a true horse with wings, the hippogriff is half horse and half griffin (page 100), having the body of a horse and the forepart of a griffin, with the wings, beak and claws of the latter. In his *Orlando Furioso,* Ariosto tells the story of the hippogriff which was tamed by the sorcerer Atlantes. The latter dwelt in an inaccessible castle in the Pyrenees, where he kept prisoner his foster son Rogero, who was rescued by the Christian maiden Bradamant, sister to the famous warrior Rinaldo. Rogero mounted the hippogriff and sailed over the mountains to Africa, but could not succeed in controlling his steed until he was thousands of miles away from his fair lady. A long series of adventures befell him before he finally married Bradamant.

Odin rode the wings of the storm on Sleipnir, a grey horse with eight legs which could carry its master over sea and land. There is close cognation between Odin and the Wild Huntsman who swept with his band of mounted warriors through forest and over mountain spreading destruction through the countryside. Farmers would leave the last sheaf of grain from the harvest for Sleipnir and the other horses in the hope that their crops would not be damaged.

Yet another famous horse was Al Borak ("Lightning"), the milk-white steed which carried Mahomet to the seventh heaven. It could leap out of a man's sight in one stride, had the face of a man, but the cheeks of a horse and the wings of an eagle.



Unicorn
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

The Unicorn

The Lion and the Unicorn
Were fighting for the crown.
The Lion chased the Unicorn
All round the town.

"We are come," wrote Topsell in 1607, "to the history of a beast whereof divers people in every age of the worlde have made great question, because of the rare vertues thereof; therefore it behooveth us to use some diligence in comparing togither the severall testimonies that are spoken of this beast, for the better satisfaction of such as are now alive, and clearing of the point for them that shall be borne hereafter, whether there bee a Unicorne; for that is the maine question to be resolved."

Indeed the testimonies are many, and for centuries a great deal of discussion centered upon what particular animal

was intended. The lore of the unicorn is probably more extensive than that of any other mythical animal, and the natural historians of the Renaissance devoted much space and ingenious argument to the curious belief in this animal. Aldrovandi has no fewer than sixty-seven pages on the subject.

If the unicorn has been surrounded by miraculous legends during the whole of the Middle Ages, a considerable part of this has come down from remote antiquity. Ctesias, the companion of Alexander, speaks of it, as does Pliny. The latter tells us that "the Orsean Indians hunt an exceedingly wild beast called the *monoceros,* which has a stag's head, elephant's feet, and a boar's tail, the rest of its body being like that of a horse. It makes a deep, lowing noise, and one black horn, two cubits long, projects from the middle of its forehead. This animal, they say, cannot be taken alive."

Although the unicorn was already a legendary creature in these far-off times, it was during the Middle Ages that the most fanciful legends grew around it until it became one of the outstanding features of popular mythology. For the unicorn has no place in the classic literature either of Greece or of Rome, though the belief in the magic powers of the horn of the unicorn goes right back to Ctesias, who says that in India "the dust filed from the horn is administered in a potion as a protection against deadly poisons." This superstition was widespread for centuries, and we shall have more to say about it later.

Topsell writes at great length about the unicorn. "These Beasts," he writes, "are very swift, and their legges have no Articles [joints]. They keep for the most part in the desarts, and live solitary in the tops of the Mountaines. There was nothing more horrible than the voice or braying of it, for the voice is strain'd above measure. It fighteth both with the mouth and with the heeles, with the mouth biting like a Lyon and with the heeles kicking like a Horse."

Most of the early writers dwell on its ferocity and the

fact that it was "an untameable beast by nature." Bartholomew tells us: "An Unicorn is a right cruel beast and hath that name for he hath in the middle of the forehead an horn of four foot long; and that horn is so sharp and so strong that he throweth down all or thirleth [pierces] all that he reseth [rages] on." Julius Solinus, in his *Polyhistor,* translated by Arthur Golding, speaks of the unicorn as "a Monster that belloweth horriblie, bodyed like a horse, footed like an Oliphant, tayled like a swyne, and headed like a Stagge. His horne sticketh out of the midds of his forehead, of a wonderfull brightnesse about foure foote long, so sharp that whatsoever he pusheth at, he striketh it through easily. He is never caught alive; kylled he may be, but taken he cannot bee."

Although Solinus thus affirms that the unicorn is never caught alive, and Guillim, in his *Display of Heraldry,* quoting Farnesius, likewise declares it impossible for the hunter to capture the unicorn since "the greatness of his Mind is such that he chuseth rather to die than to be taken alive," nevertheless Philip de Thaun, in his bestiary, tells us how its capture may be brought about. His narrative is written in old French, but Topsell gives us the story in English as follows:

"It is sayd that Unicorns above all other creatures doe reverence Virgines and young Maides, and that many times at the sight of them they grow tame, and come and sleepe beside them, for there is in their nature a certaine savor, wherewithall the Unicornes are allured and delighted; for which occasion the Indian and Ethiopian hunters use this strategem to take the beast.

"They take a goodly, strong, and beautifull young man, whom they dresse in the Apparell of a woman, besetting him with divers odoriferous flowers and spices . . . the Unicorne deceaved with the outward shape of a woman, and sweete smells, cometh to the young man without feare, and so suffereth his head to be covered and wrapped within his large sleeves, never stirring, but lying still and asleepe, as in

his most acceptable repose. Then, when the hunters, by the signe of the young man, perceave him fast and secure, they come uppon him and by force cut off his horne."

Topsell, generally credulous, finds it difficult to accept this legend and says: 'I leave the reader to the freedome of his owne judgment to believe or refuse this relation; neither is it fit that I should omit it, seeing that all writers since the time of Tzetzes* doe most constantly beleeve it."

But Topsell's account differs from that of de Thaun inasmuch as the latter makes no mention of a man dressed in woman's clothing, but tells us the lure was in the shape of a young virgin with breast exposed, which the unicorn kissed before going to sleep. Presumably that was too immoral for the Reverend Edward Topsell.

The *Physiologus* tells the same story quite simply – "men lead a virgin to the place where he most resorts, and leave her there alone. As soon as he sees this virgin he runs and lays his head in her lap. She caresses him and he falls asleep. The hunters then approach and capture him."

For centuries the horn of the unicorn was in great demand on account of its presumed powers of detecting poison. The horn was usually referred to as "alicorn" to avoid the far from euphonious "unicorn-horn." It was particularly prized in court circles, for a ruler knew from the experience of others that death might come to him at any moment from poison in his meat or drink. Few potentates could feast without fear, and as a consequence they were willing to pay handsomely for such a powerful antidote against poison as the alicorn was reputed to be. And as the demand increased, so did the price; a piece of horn was deemed a princely gift. At the marriage of Catherine de Médicis to the Dauphin of France, the bride's uncle, Pope Clement VII, gave the bridegroom's father, Francis I, a piece of "true" alicorn.

*Tzetzes (*c.* 1110-*c.* 1180) was the author of a long poem on historical subjects in which he quotes more than 400 authors.

In his *Gull's Hornbook* Dekker speaks of "the unicorn whose horn is worth a city," and in old inventories the "essai"* of the horn of a unicorn is frequently mentioned. At the head of an inventory taken in the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth (Harleian MSS 5953) we read: *"Imprimis,* a piece of unicorn's horn," and Peacham places "that horn of Windsor, of an unicorn very likely," among the sights worth seeing. This was presumably the piece of horn seen by the German lawyer Paul Hentzner, who, when at Windsor in 1598, was shown among other things, "the horn of a unicorn about eight spans and a half in length, valued at about £10,000." It was said to have been found in 1577 on an island in Frobisher's Strait.

"One little cup of unicorn's horn" was also in the possession of Queen Elizabeth, and was subsequently presented by James I to his queen, Anne of Denmark. In Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* we are told that "in 1641 the Marquis de la Ferté Imbaut, Marshal of France, saw in the Tower of London a Unicorn's horn covered with plates of silver and estimated at £40,000." That, in terms of money today, would be almost a million pounds!

Even parings from the horn could be sold at high prices, and only very few knew how to distinguish the "real" from the false, for high prices and a buyer's market led to all kinds of adulteration. However, we are told in an old book of infallible recipes how to avoid being swindled when buying alicorn. "For experience of the Unicorn's horn, to know whether it be right or not; put silk upon a burning coal, and upon the silk the aforesaid horn, and if so be that it be true, the silk will not be a whit consumed."

As there really was no such animal as a unicorn, the gullible were offered a variety of substitutes, such as rhinoceros horn or the horn of the narwhal, and the demand was kept up by the eulogies of contemporary writers.

*Assay.

Centaur
[Aldrovandi:
Historia Monstrorum,
1642]

The Centaur

A well-known, yet curious, example of a combined human and animal form is found in the centaur. In Greek mythology the centaurs, part horse, part man, dwelt in the mountains of Arcadia and Thessaly. According to legend they were the offspring of Ixion and Nephele, or as a variant, of Kentaurus (the son of these two) and certain Magnesian mares. While the Lapithae were holding a feast in honour of the wedding of their king, Pirithous, to Hippodamia, the centaurs tried to carry off the bride and other women.* A battle ensued, in which Theseus, who was present, took part, and the centaurs were defeated and driven from their haunts on the slopes of Mount Pelion.

In early art the centaurs are depicted as human beings in

*A representation of this event is shown on the west pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia.

front, merging with the body and hind legs of a horse. The probable explanation of the legend is that the Greeks of early times, unfamiliar with horse-riding, imagined the horsemen of the north to be one with their horses. Similarly when the natives of South America, where the horse was unknown, first saw mounted Spaniards in armour, they took man and beast to be one.

In mythology the centaur has a dignity absent from most other monstrous forms, and the conjunction of man and horse had an element of nobility. Most celebrated of the centaurs was Chiron, famous for his knowledge of music, medicine and archery. He taught mankind the use of plants and medicinal herbs, and acted as tutor to some of the greatest heroes of his age. Son of Cronus and Philyra (a daughter of Oceanus), Chiron is said to have owed his shape to the fact that Cronus, to escape the jealousy of his wife, Rhea, had transformed himself into a horse.

When the centaurs were driven from their home on Mount Pelion, they migrated to the Peloponnese, and there Heracles, pursuing the Erymanthian Boar, which he had to capture alive, was entertained by the centaur Pholos, son of Silenus by a nymph. When Pholos broached the jar of wine which Dionysus had left there long before, the neighbouring centaurs, affected by the fumes from the strong wine, made a rush for Pholos' cave. There a fierce fight took place in which Heracles drove off the attackers. They took refuge with their king, Chiron, who was accidentally wounded in the knee by an arrow from Heracles' bow – an arrow which was poisoned through having been dipped in the blood of the Hydra. Dismayed at the accident to his old friend, Heracles drew out the arrow, but all Chiron's knowledge of medicine was of no avail and he suffered incredible torments, from which, since he was immortal, he could seek no relief in death. To escape from everlasting pain he surrendered his immortality to Prometheus. Moved by compassion, Zeus placed Chiron

among the stars. To the Greeks, he was represented by the constellation Sagittarius, the ninth sign of the zodiac.

The story of Chiron is paralleled in Assyrian legend by the strange creature Hea-bani, represented on ancient gems as a being half man and half bull, with the body, face and arms of a man, and the horns, legs, hoofs and tail of a bull. Like Chiron, he was celebrated for his wisdom, and was eventually killed by accident during a combat between Gizdhubar and Khumbaba. The author of the *Legend of Gizdhubar* (W. St. Chad Boscawen) writes: "Hea-bani was true and loyal to Gizdhubar, and when Istar (the Assyrian Venus), foiled in her love for Gizdhubar, flew to heaven to see her father Anu (the Chaldean Zeus), and to seek redress for the slight put upon her, the latter created a winged bull called 'The Bull of Heaven' which was sent to earth. Hea-Bani, however, helps his lord, the bull is slain, and the two companions enter Erech in triumph. Hea-Bani met with his death when Gizdhubar fought Khumbaba, and 'Gizdhubar for Hea-Bani his friend wept bitterly and lay on the ground.'"

The Devilish Satyr

The Satyrs, mythological attendants of Dionysus, were forest gods associated with fertility rites. They are represented as having the legs and hindquarters of a goat, small horns, and goat-like ears. At least, thus are the Arcadian Satyrs shown; the Anatolian Satyrs are said to have had the ears, feet and tail of a horse. The Greeks were very fond of creatures combining human and animal shapes. Pliny says that the Satyrs got their name from the Greek term for the virile organ, since they were by nature so lustful. Later, myth and monkey became interwoven, and the word was applied to a kind of ape. In modern terminology the orangutan is *Simia satyrus.*

Topsell has much to say concerning the Satyr:

"As the *Cynecephall* or Baboun-Apes have given occasion to some to imagine (though falsly) there were such men, so the Satyres, a most rare and seldome seene beast, hath occasioned others to thinke it was a Devil; and the Poets with their Apes, the Painters, Limmers, and Carvers, to encrease that superstition, have therefore described him with hornes on his head, and feet like Goates, whereas Satires have neither of both. And it may be that Devils have at some time appeared to men in this likenes, as they have done in the likenes of the *Onocentaure* and wilde Asse, and other shapes, it also being probable that the Devils take not any daenomination or shape from Satyres, but rather the Apes themselves from Devils whome they resemble, for there are many things common to the Satyre-apes and devilish Satyres, as their human shape, their abode in solitary places, their rough hayre, and lust to women, wherewithall other Apes are naturally infected; but especially Satyres.

"The Satyres are in the Ilands *Satirides,* which are three in number standing right over against India on the farther side of *Ganges;* of which *Euphremus Car* rehearseth their

history: that when he sailed into Italy, by the rage of winde and evill weather they were driven to a coast unnavigable where there were many desart Islandes, inhabited of wilde men, and the Marriners refused to land upon some Islands having heretofore had triall of the inhumaine and uncivill behaviour of the inhabitants; so that they brought us to the *Satirian Islands*, where we saw the inhabitants red, and had tayles joynd to their back not much less than horses."

Bartholomew Glanville mentions the apes called Satyrs. "Some ape," he writes, "is called Satirus, plesynge in face wyth mery meuynges and playenges." Peter Martyr identified the Satires with the Wood Woses, or Wild Men of the Woods, who lived, troglodyte fashion, in subterranean caves and hovels.

Bartholomew, moreover, distinguishes several kinds of Satyr. Some of them, called Cynocephali, have heads like hounds; others are called Cyclops, "for one of them hath but one eye, and that in the middle of the forehead, and some be all headless and noseless, and their eyen be in the shoulders, and some have plain faces without nostrils, and the nether lips of them stretch so that they hele therewith their faces when they be in the heat of the sun; and some of them have closed mouths, in their breasts only one hole, and breathe and suck as it were with pipes and veins." In Scythia, Bartholomew informs us, there are some called panchios, whose ears are so large that they can cover their bodies with them. Others, in Ethiopia, have only one foot, and this so large that they use it to make a shade when the sun is too hot. These fabulous creatures are depicted in ancient editions of Sir John Mandeville's travels.

Werewolves

The belief in lycanthropy, or the transmutation of men into wolves, was widely spread in the Middle Ages. In fact the idea of the changing of human beings into animal form is a very ancient one, a classic example being the story of Beauty and the Beast. In his *Histories* Herodotus relates an affirmation of the Scythians to the effect that the tribe of the Neuri change themselves once a year into wolves. For according to medieval superstition a man could both be changed into, or change himself at will into, a wolf.

Pliny relates that one member of the family of Antaeus was chosen annually, by lot, to be transformed into a wolf, and in that shape he was forced to remain for nine years. On Mount Lycaeus, in Arcadia, a festival was held in honour of Zeus Lycaeus, when a man was changed into a wolf. This festival is thought to have originated in the legend, told by Ovid, of the king of Arcadia, Lycaon, who sought to test the divinity of Zeus by offering him human flesh to eat, and for this sacrilege was turned into a wolf.

The superstition was once common throughout Europe, and is said to linger still in parts of France, where the "man-wolf" is called a *loup-garou*. In the fifteenth century a council of theologians, convened by the emperor Sigismund, came to the conclusion that the werewolf was no myth but a reality. It may be that the wolf figured in this way in Europe because it was, during the Middle Ages, the animal which caused the greatest devastation; in other parts of the world the transformation of man might be into a tiger or a serpent.

It must here be acknowledged that although Pliny relates instances of lycanthropy, he is not credulous on this point, and reprimands the ancient Greek writers, saying: "It is astonishing to what lengths the credulity of the Greeks will

go! There is no falsehood, however barefaced, to which some of them will not bear testimony."

Olaus Magnus, in a chapter devoted to *The Fierceness of Men who by Charms are turned into Wolves,* writes: "In the Feast of Christ's Nativity, in the night, at a certain place, that they are resolved upon amongst themselves, there is gathered together such a multitude of Wolves changed from men, that dwell in divers places, which afterwards the same night doth so rage with wonderfull fiercenesse, both against mankind and other creatures that are not fierce by nature, that the Inhabitants of that country suffer more hurt from them than ever they do from the true natural Wolves. For as it is proved, they set upon the houses of men that are in the Woods, with wonderfull fiercenesse, and labour to break down the doors, whereby they may destroy both men and other creatures that remain there.

"They go into the Beer-Cellars, and there they drink out some Tuns of Beer or Mede, and they heap all the empty vessels one upon another in the midst of the Cellar, and so leave them: wherein they differ from natural and true Wolves. But the place where by chance they stayd that night, the Inhabitants of those Countries think to be prophetical. Because if any ill successe befall a Man in that place; as if his Cart overturn and he be thrown down in the Snow, they are fully perswaded that man must die that year, as they have for many years proved it by experience. . . .

"And it is constantly affirmed that amongst that multitude there are the great men and chiefest Nobility of the Land. The reason of this Metamorphosis, that is exceeding contrary to Nature, is given by one skilled in this witchcraft, by drinking to one in a Cup of Ale, and by mumbling certain words at the same time, so that he who is to be admitted into that unlawful Society do accept it."

Topsell, credulous though he was as a rule, is dubious about crediting certain reports, for he writes: "There is a certaine

territorie of Ireland (whereof Mr. Cambden writeth) that the inhabitants which live till they be past fifty yeare old, are foolishly reported to be turned into wolves."

The folklore relating to werewolves is extensive and ranges over many countries. In many parts of Europe, notably in the Balkans, the werewolf and vampire are closely linked, and it was thought that after death lycanthropists became vampires. The change of the human being into the form of a wolf came about, according to the old legends, either through some magical power which enabled the man or woman involved to gratify a taste for human flesh or as the result of a judgment of the gods in punishment for some crime. The story of Lycaon is an example of the latter.

Although lycanthropy was considered to be the result of sorcery, a Frenchman, J. de Nynauld, while believing this, as did all his contemporaries, thought there was also a "natural lycanthropy," which he considered a form of illness. He thus showed himself rather in advance of his age. "Natural lycanthropy," he says, "is an illness called by some Melancholy or Wolff Madness, and by others is termed Lycaony or Cynanthropy, because those who are stricken with this illness think they have been transformed into wolves or dogs. This happens to them through the vapours of the burning melancholy or black anger which finds its way to the brain and deranges all the senses, in particular that of the Imagination, which is so distorted as to cause them to exteriorize what is purely inside the mind."

Although Pliny relates the Antaeus legend, he himself was sceptical about werewolves, and writes: "One may confidently assert that nothing is more false than the story that there are men who turn themselves into wolves and back again – unless, of course, one is determined to believe all the lying stories which have been handed down for an infinity of centuries."

But despite Pliny's scepticism the belief in werewolves was still as strong as ever fifteen centuries after his death. In the

famous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1519) a long chapter is devoted to the question *An homines in bestiales formas possint transmutari.* This book clearly shows that the Middle Ages believed firmly in the voluntary and maleficent transformation of the magician into a werewolf. One tale goes that in 1588 there was burned at Riom a lady of rank who, transformed into a *loup-garou,* had savagely attacked a gamekeeper. The man, after a fearful struggle, succeeded in cutting off one of the paws of the evil animal. But when he came to turn over the trophy to his master, the paw had resumed its human shape and the lord of the manor recognized with horror the hand of his wife, bearing on its finger the ancestral ring.

Manticora
[Topsell: *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes*, 1607]

The Manticora

The mantycors of the montaynes
Might fede them on thy braynes

wrote John Skelton in an imprecation upon the cat that killed "Phillip Sparrow." Of all the curious animals, other than apes, depicted as possessing something akin to the human countenance, none is stranger than the manticora, especially as drawn for Gesner. Ctesias, describing the "martikhora," as he calls it, says that its face is like a man's, in size it is like a lion, and in colour red, like cinnabar. It has three rows of teeth, ears similar to man's, eyes of a pale blue, and a tail resembling that of a land scorpion, armed with a sting and more than a cubit long. It has also, says that writer, stings on each side of its tail, which it shoots off like arrows.

Topsell recapitulates the description of Ctesias, and adds: "I take it to be the same Beast which *Avicen* calleth *Marion* and *Maricomorion*, with her taile she woundeth her Hunters whether they come before her or behind her, and presently

when the quils are cast forth new ones grow up in their roome, wherwithal she overcommeth all the hunters; and although India be full of divers ravening beastes, yet none of them are stiled with a title of *Androposphagi*, that is to say, Man-eaters, except onely this Mantichora. . . . This also is the same beast which is called *Leucrocuta* about the bigness of a wilde Asse, being in legs and hoofes like a Hart, having his mouth reaching on both sides to his eares, and the hand & face of a female like unto a Badgers."

Now Ctesias of Cnidos was a Greek physician who resided in Persia for many years at the court of Artaxerxes Mnemon and had plenty of opportunity to question the Persians about the information they possessed concerning India. Unfortunately much that Ctesias wrote down was transcribed at a far later date by Photius the Patriarch in the ninth century A.D., a man who had a great predilection for the marvellous and who probably embroidered the original account with some of his own fancies.

The Yale or Jall or Eale

This animal, purely heraldic, is one of the Queen's beasts. It somewhat resembles an antelope, but the chief difference lies in the curious disposition of the yale's horns, which can be swivelled round at will, so that one may be pointing forward and the other backward.

The yale first occurs heraldically as the sinister supporter of the arms of John Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, on his stall plate as Knight of the Garter in St. George's Chapel, Windsor (*c.* 1440). It was used as one of her beasts by his daughter, the Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, and mother of Henry VII. It appears on the gatehouses of her two foundations at Cambridge – St. John's and Christ's colleges.

The badge of the yale was granted by Henry VIII in 1525 to his natural son Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond (probably because he was also Duke of Somerset), and after the Duke's death in 1536, Henry used the yale at Hampton Court Palace as one of his own "beasts."

As a heraldic beast the yale is depicted as having a head and body resembling those of a horse, with a goat's beard, large boar's tusks, ringed horns curving backwards and outwards, tufts of hair and spots on the body, cloven hoofs, and a tufted tail.

A yale forms the dexter supporter of the arms of Henry Cary, Baron Hunsdon (d. 1596), on his elaborate monument in Westminster Abbey. He was connected by descent with the Beaufort family.

Prior to its introduction into heraldry, the yale is found in early bestiaries under the name of eale, a wonderful beast from Ethiopia (i.e. Africa) which was as large as a hippopotamus and had swivelling horns to aid it in combat with its enemies.

Lamia
[Topsell: *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes,* 1607]

Lamiae and Empusae

They are the Lamiae, wenches vile,
With brazen brows and lips that smile.
Goethe: Faust, trans. Bayard Taylor

This was a curious creature of the imagination, represented in some ancient bestiaries as having the head and breasts of a woman and the body of a four-footed animal, with a flowing tail, the hind feet having divided hoofs. It was supposed to suck the blood of humans, especially children. Greene, in *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592), talks of "a troop of nice wantons, fair women, that like to the Lamiae had faces like angels, eies like stars, brestes like the golden fruit in the Hesperides, but from the middle downwards their shapes like serpents."

This female phantom originated in the mythical story of Lamia, daughter of Belus and queen of Libya, who was beloved by Zeus and bore him several children, who were

killed by Hera in a jealous rage. In consequence Lamia vowed to destroy the children of others. Later she associated herself with the demons called the Empusae; the children of Hecate, who slept with young men and sucked their blood while they were asleep. Goethe's *Bride of Corinth* is based on the story of Machates and Philemon, in which a young man marries an Empusa, who sucks his blood at night.

Bartholomew says that "in Sicia ben beestys wyth shape of men and fete of horses and suche wonderfull beestys ben called Lamie amonge many men." Lamias are mentioned, also, in a letter of Prester John quoted in the Chronicle of Albericus, together with centaurs, fauns, Satyrs and pygmies, all of which were to be found in his lands.

The Gluttonous Gulon

This creature is thus described by Topsell: "It is thought to be engendered by a Hyena and a Lioness. When it hath found a dead carkass he eateth thereof so violently that his belly standeth out like a bell; then he seeketh for some narrow passage betwixt two trees, and there draweth through his body, by pressing whereof he driveth out the meat which he had eaten; and being so emptied returneth and devoureth as much as he did before, and goeth again and emptieth himself as in former manner, and so continueth eating and emptying till all be eaten."

Patagonian Su
[Gesner: *Historiae Animalium*, 1565]

Of a Wilde Beast Called Su

In this manner Topsell heads his chapter dealing with the fearsome animal. "There is a region in the new found world," he writes, "called *Gigantes,* and the inhabitants thereof are called *Patagones.*" Patagonia had only recently been discovered when Topsell was writing, and early voyagers had described it as being inhabited by a race of giants.

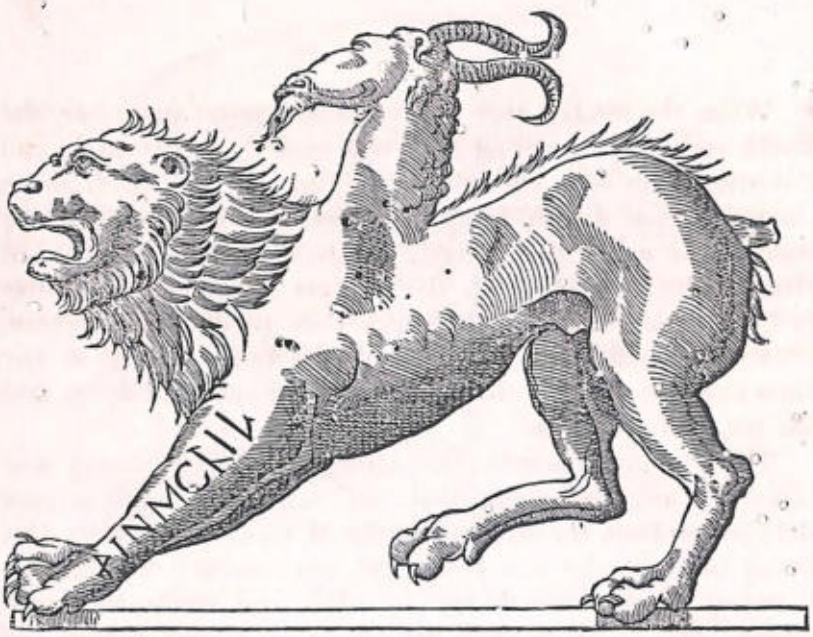
"Because their country is cold," he continues, "being far in the south, they cloath themselves with the skins of a beast called in their owne toong *Su,* for by reason that this beast liveth for the most part neere the waters, therefore they call it by the name of *Su,* which signifieth water. The true image thereof as it was taken by Thevetus* I have heere inserted, for it is of a very deformed shape, and monstrous presence, a great ravener, and an untamable wilde beast.

*André Thevet, French traveller and Cosmographer Royal of France.

"When the hunters that desire her skinne set upon her, she flyeth very swift, carrying her yong ones upon her back, and covering them with her broad taile; now, for so much as no dogge or man dareth to approach neere unto her (because such is the wrath thereof, that in the pursuit she killeth all that commeth neare hir), the hunters digge severall pittes or great holes in the earth, which they cover with boughes, sticks and earth, so weakly that if the beast chance at any time to come upon it, she and her young ones fall down into the pit, and are taken.

"This cruel, untamable, impatient, violent, ravening, and bloody beast, perceiving that her natural strength cannot deliver her from the wit and policy of men, her hunters (for being inclosed she can never get out againe) the hunters being at hand to watch her downfall, and worke her overthrowe, first of all to save her young ones from taking and taming, she destroyeth them all with her own teeth; for there was never any of them taken alive, and when she seeth the hunters come about her, she roareth, cryeth, howleth, brayeth, and uttereth such a fearefull, noysome, and terrible clamor, that the men which watch to kill her are not thereby a little amazed; but, at last, being animated, because there can be no resistance, they approach, and with their darts and speares wound her to death, and then take off her skin, and leave the carcasse in the earth. And this is all I find recorded of this most strange beast."

And most strange it is, if we are to judge by the drawing which accompanies Topsell's description.



Chimera
[Aldrovandi: *Historia Monstrorum*, 1642]

The Dire Chimera

Of dire chimeras and enchanted isles
And rifted rocks, whose entrance leads to Hell.
Milton: Comus

"The invincible Chimera," we read in the *Iliad*, was "of divine and not of mortal lineage, a lion in front, a dragon behind, and a she-goat in the midst, breathing forth the dreadful might of blazing fire." In Greek mythology it was the offspring of Typhon, a terrible monster with a hundred serpents' heads, and Echidna, another monster, half woman and half serpent.

This Chimera of mythology was born in Lycia and was slain by Bellerophon – a task laid upon him by Iobates, king

of Lycia. "When the Goat-emblem disappeared," says Robert Graves, "the Chimaera gave place to the Sphinx, with her winged lion's body and serpent's tail."

There are still chimeras today. That is the name given by ichthyologists to the fish also known as "ghost sharks." The name chimera is given to them on account of their strange appearance, though this is hardly grotesque enough to recall the legendary monster of ancient Greece.

Griffin
[*from a carving in the cathedral of Autun*]

The Griffin or Gryphon, and the Hippogriff

The griffon is a bird rich feathered,
His head is like a lion, and his flight
Is like the eagle's, much for to be feared,
For why, he kills men in the ugly night.
Robert Chester: Loves Martyr

Scarcely less famous than the dragon, the griffin was a compound animal having the head, wings and feet of an eagle, with the hinder part of a lion. There is a lovely drawing of a sleeping griffin by Sir John Tenniel in *Alice in Wonderland*.

The description of a griffin in the *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville is an excellent example of the credulity and the

belief in things passing strange which flourished during the Middle Ages:

"In that Contree [the land of Bacharie] ben many Griffounes, more plentee than in ony Contree. Sum men seyn that thei hand the Body upward as an Egle, and benethe as a Lyoun: and treuly thei seyn sothe, that thei ben of that schapp. But a Griffoun hathe the body more gret and is more strong thanne 8 Lyouns; and more gret and strongere than an 100 Egles, such as we han amonges us. For a Griffoun wil bere, fleynge to his Nest, a gret Horse, or 2 Oxen yoked togider, as thei gon at the Plowghe. For he hathe his Talouns so longe and so large and grete upon his Feet, as thoughe thei weren Hornes of grete Oxen; so that men maken Cuppes of hem, to drynken of; and of her Ribbes and of the Pennes of hir Wenges, men maken Bowes fulle stronge, to schote with Arwes and Quarelle."

Legh, the heraldic writer, says of griffins that "they are of a great hugenes, for I have a claw of one of their pawes, which should show them to be as bygge as two lyons."

The griffin was supposed to combine the qualities of the lion, the king of beasts, with that of the eagle, the king of birds. The griffin's wings, unlike those of the dragon, were feathered, as Chester says. The winged griffin, however, is the female, for the male has no wings but spikes which sprout from various parts of the body.

The griffin is one of the oldest and most popular beasts in heraldry and appears on numerous coats of arms, so that the old heraldic writers frequently mention it. John Bossewell, in his *Workes of Armorie* (1572), seems to have read Sir John Mandeville, for his description of the griffin contains many echoes from Mandeville's *Travels*, as for instance when he states that the griffin "is strong enemye to the horse and is of such might as he is able to take upp an horse and a man armed upon hym."

The griffin was assumed as an emblem by the family of Le

Dispenser, and the upper part appears as the crest of the helm of Hugh le Dispenser, buried at Tewkesbury in 1349. King Edward III had a griffin engraved on his private seal.

The claws of the griffin were highly prized, for it was thought that only the most holy man could acquire one, and then only if he were able to cure a griffin of some hurt or sickness, could he demand one as payment.

Few mythical animals are older than the griffin, for a tiny beast, modelled in gold, and found in the royal tombs in Crete more than 3000 years old, portrays all its characteristics – the head and wings of an eagle and the body and legs of a lion, except that the tail is not tufted like a lion's. In the course of time eagle's legs and claws replaced the animal forelegs.

Nemesis, that stern avenger of crime, was often depicted as a woman with wings, a whip or sword in her hand, borne in a chariot drawn by griffins.

Sir Thomas Browne devotes a whole chapter of his *Vulgar Errors* (Book III, Chapter II) to griffins. He is, of course, a doubter and declares that "if examined by the doctrine of animals, the invention is monstrous, nor much inferior unto the figment of sphynx, chimaera, and harpies." He adds: "As for the testimonie of ancient writers, they are but derivative, and terminate all in one Aristeus, a poet of Proconesus, who affirmed that near the Arimaspi, or one-eyed nation, griffins defended the mines of gold." According to this legend the Arimaspians, a one-eyed people of Scythia, tried to creep up by stealth and seize the gold which the griffin guarded, but he fell upon them and tore them to pieces. Milton makes use of this legend in *Paradise Lost*.

There are two varieties of the griffin family – the hippogriff and the oriental simoorgh. The hippogriff was a winged horse whose father was a griffin and its mother a filly. The simoorgh, a rather similar creature, figures in the epic poems of the Persian writers Saadi and Ferdusi.

INSECTS

Pismires and Ant-Lions

Sometimes he angers me
With telling me of the moldwarp and the ant.
Shakespeare: Henry IV, Part I

Pismire was an old name for the ant, and the dictionary tells us that the name is a compound of pis and mire, from the urinous smell of an anthill. In Sir John Mandeville's *Travels* there is a delightful account of the hills of gold in Taprobane (i.e. Ceylon) which were guarded by pismires. Old editions of this work have a quaint, if ludicrous, picture showing one of the hills with ants as big as cats busy filling paniers on the back of a mare with nuggets of gold. Here, in modernized spelling, is Mandeville's narration:

"Also in this Island of Taprobane are great Hills of Gold, that Pismires keep full diligently. And they refine the pure Gold and cast away the impure. And these Pismires are as large as Hounds, so that no man dare come to those Hills, for the Pismires would assail him and devour him anon; so that no man may get of that Gold but by great cunning. And therefore, when it is great heat, the Pismires rest in the Earth from prime of the day to Noon: and then the folk of the Country take Camels, Dromedaries, Horses, and other Beasts, and go thither, and load them as hastily as they may. And after that they flee away as quickly as the Beasts may go, ere the Pismires come out of the Earth.

"And in other times, when it is not so hot, and the Pismires do not rest in the Earth, then they get the Gold by this subtlety; they take Mares that have young Colts or Foals, and lean upon the Mares empty vessels made therefore; and they are open at the top and hang low to the Earth. And then they send forth the Mares for to pasture about those hills and withold the Foals with them at home. And when the Pismires see the Vessels they leap in anon, and they

have this kind [peculiarity] that they let no thing be empty among them, but anon they fill it, be it what matter of thing that it be; and so they fill the Vessels with Gold. And when the folk suppose that the Vessels be full, they put forth the young Foals and make them look for their Dams, and then anon the Mares return towards their Foals with their loads of Gold; and then men unload them, and get Gold enough by this subtlety. For the Pismires will suffer Beasts to go and pasture among them; but no man in no wise."

Johannes Jonstonius devotes a chapter to ants in his *History of the Wonderful Things of Nature* (1657). He writes:

"In the Kingdom of Senega there are white Pismires and naturally they build low houses. For they carry earth in their mouths and cement it without lime; you would say that they are like Ovens, or little Country houses. In the province of Mangu they are red, and they eat them with Pepper. Among the Brachmans they are 4 fingers breadth in greatnesse; in new Spain they are as big as Beetles. Amongst the Dardae, which is a mighty Nation in the Mountains of India there is said to be a Hill of 3000 furlongs in compasse; there are gold mines under it that Ants as big as Foxes do dig into. I think, as Strabo doth, that it is a fable.

"In Baia Salvatoris there is an infinite company of them; they have in their mouths something like pinsers and with that they so crop the Plants that they dye with their biting of them. In the same West Indies they are called Comixen, half-Pismires and half-Worms that creep with a white tail. They eat into the wood and do great harm to houses. When they creep up a wall or house they are covered with earth a finger thick and they live under this. In Brasil, when they are bruised they smell like Cedar. Their head is so small that they have no eys in it, but above it there are some additionalls like two hairs coming forth. It is a sign that these are their eys because when they are cut off they mistake their way. When this kind grows old, it comes to have wings."

An interesting, though rather detestable, creature called the ant-lion is found in some of the bestiaries of the Middle Ages, and there is an illustration of it in a fifteenth-century bestiary based on the work of Bartholomew Glanville, now in the Library of Cambridge University (Gg.-6-5). The ant-lion was so called because of its size, since "while to other animals it is only an ant, to ants themselves it is as if it were a lion."

As an instance of the implicit credulity of the Middle Ages witness this absurd account of the ant-lion given in the *Physiologus*. This states that the ant-lion's father was shaped like a lion and his mother like an ant. The father was a flesh-eater; its mother herbivorous. When these two had issue, this was the ant-lion, partaking of the features of its parents, its forepart being that of a lion and its hindquarters like an ant. Being thus composed the wretched insect could neither eat flesh like its father nor herbs like its mother, and so it starved to death!

For a modern account of the somewhat pernicious activities of this creature, see the works of that great entomologist J.H. Fabre.

The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.
Tennyson: The Princess

That social insect the bee aroused the interest of man in the very earliest days of his history, and since the bee is indigenous to many countries it is not surprising that bee folklore and legend is widespread. The history of the European honey bee, *Apis mellifica*, actually precedes that of man, as fossil remains bear witness. Many thousands of years ago honey was gathered by man for food and drink, for in the caves at Bicorp, near Valencia in Spain, there is a rock painting that dates from Paleolithic times of men gathering honey.

Honey was well-known in ancient Egypt, where it was used not only as a sweetener for cakes, but also for the process of mummification. The ancient civilizations of Sumeria and Babylonia knew something of apiculture, for honey was a customary offering in great religious ceremonies. And in the Far East the old sacred books of India and China contain frequent allusions to bees and honey, despite the fact that ancient classical writers asserted that there were no bees in India. Our first fable, then, comes from Aelian, who tells us that in that country "in spring it rains honey, which falls on the grass and reeds, and this makes wonderful pasturage for sheep and cattle. The shepherds take their herds to these pastures and the animals give such sweet milk that there is no need to mix it with honey, as the Greeks do." Aelian is probably recording what he heard from travellers about the sugar cane, for the honey bee is native to India, as it is to Europe. The gods Vishnu, Krishna and Indra were called *Madhava*, or the nectar-born ones, and they are often

represented by a bee resting on a lotus flower. The Sanskrit word for honey is *madhu*, which would appear to have an etymological kinship with the old Saxon word *medu* or mead, a drink made of fermented honey.

The ancient Greeks at first knew nothing of apiculture, for though bees are mentioned by Homer, he speaks of them as nesting in the hollow rock, so that the first honey used in Greece was wild honey. When Patrokles, the favourite companion of Achilles, was killed, the latter placed oil and honey in great two-handled jars by the funeral pyre.

Among the Romans the most important writers on apiculture were Varro, Virgil, and Columella, all of whom treated the subject very fully. The fourth book of Virgil's *Georgics* is wholly devoted to bees, for whose intelligence the poet had the greatest admiration.

One of the earliest of the Greek myths concerning bees deals with the birth of Zeus, the son of Cronus. Having been warned that one of his children would seize his throne, Cronus swallowed them as soon as they were born. But when the sixth child, Zeus, was born, his mother, Rhea, saved him by her cunning. She wrapped a stone in swaddling clothes and the unsuspecting Cronus swallowed it. Meanwhile the infant was hidden in a cave on Mount Dicte, inhabited by sacred bees, which fed him on honey, and the goat Amaltheia gave him her milk. The cave was carefully guarded by the demi-gods, the Kouretes, who, when the infant cried, clashed their weapons together to drown the noise, so that Cronus could not hear it.

Another aspect of this legend is illustrated on a Greek amphora in the British Museum. Four men entered the cave, having protected themselves with armour, to try and steal the honey, but when they caught sight of the infant Zeus their armour fell apart at the seams, and, unprotected, they were attacked by the sacred bees. The vase, which shows the four men being attacked by the bees, dates from about 550 B.C.

One of the many titles bestowed on Zeus was *Melissaios*, or Bee-man, from the legend that he had a son by a nymph, who, terrified of the wrath of Hera, the consort of Zeus, hid the babe in a wood where his father had him fed by bees. The child was found by the shepherd Phagros, who gave him the name Melitæus. When the child grew up he became a great hero and founded Melita, the town of honey.

In ancient times, and indeed up to comparatively recently, the idea that many insects were produced by spontaneous generation was widespread, and in Porta's *Natural Magick* the author says: "Aelianus writes that Oxen are commodious many wayes; amongst the rest, this is one excellent commodity, that being dead, there may be generated of them a very profitable kind of Creatures, namely Bees." This idea of ox-born bees were prevalent in many countries. One of the first German writers on natural history, Konrad von Megenberg, in *Das buch der natur*, published in 1475 at Augsburg, averred that bees came from the bellies of oxen — a piece of information he seems to have borrowed from the *Liber de Natura Rerum* of Thomas de Cantimpré, who in turn copied it from the ancient classical writers.

The superstition persisted all through the Middle Ages, and in Stuart times Ben Jonson wrote, in *The Alchemist*:

> Art can beget bees, hornets, beetles, wasps,
> Out of the carcasses and dung of creatures;
> Yea, scorpions of an herb, being rightly places.

The origin of this piece of misinformation seems to have sprung from the legend of Aristaeus in Greek mythology. Aristaeus was a god of husbandry, son of the nymph Cyrene by Apollo. He fell in love with Eurydice, and she, when trying to escape from him, trod on a snake, from whose bite she died. To avenge her death the Dryads killed all the bees belonging to Aristaeus. Here is the rest of the legend as told by Ovid in the first book of *Fasti*:

"Aristaeus wept, for all his bees had died, leaving their combs unfinished. Cyrene, his mother, sought to console him, saying that Proteus would tell him how to obtain fresh swarms. So together they sought Proteus, who usually lived in the sea, but at noon would come out and rest upon an island at the mouth of the Nile. When they had found him, Aristaeus bound him fast with fetters as he lay sleeping, for Proteus had the power to change himself into any shape. Being thus bound, Proteus was forced to speak, and told Aristaeus that he must bury the carcase of a dead ox, and as soon as the carcase decayed, swarms of bees would issue from it."

Among the earliest books written in England on the subject of the management of bees is one by Thomas Hill, published in 1568. But the information contained in it is mostly compiled from Aristotle, Pliny, Varro, and other classical authors. Charles Butler, Rector of Wooton, in 1609 brought out a book on bees which he called *The Feminine Monarchie*, and which was reprinted several times. Again, although the book makes amusing reading by reason of its quaint style, the author leaned heavily on the assistance of the classical writers. There is a curious passage concerning the famous pedagogue Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540), who was invited by Cardinal Wolsey to England to accept the University Readership in Humanity, which the Cardinal had just established. Butler writes: "When Vives was sent by Cardinal Wolsey to Oxford there to be the public professor of rhetoric, being placed in the College of Bees,* he was welcomed thither by a swarm of bees; which sweet creatures, to signify the incomparable sweetness of his eloquence, settled themselves over his head, under the leads of his study, where they have continued above 100 years. . . . The truth of the story has the special testimony of a worthy antiquary of our time, who had heard his master, Dr. Benefield, call these Bees, Vives' Bees."

*Corpus Christi College, Oxford. It was called the College of Bees after the superscription of a letter from Erasmus to its first President — *Eras. Rot. Joanni Claymunde Apum Praesidi.*

Samuel Hartlib's *Reformed Commonwealth of Bees* (1655) gives an account of the generation of bees from the carcass of a steer "as practised by that great husbandman, old Mr. Carew of Anthony in Cornwall." This shows that the myth of the ox-born bee was still current well into the seventeenth century.

The most common superstition regarding bees, one common in most of Western Europe, and taken to America by the first European settlers, was the strange belief that one must always acquaint bees with a death in the family. This strange custom is mentioned in Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, under the heading "Bees Informed of Deaths":

"Some years since, observes a correspondent of the Athenaeum, a gentleman at a dinner table happened to mention that he was surprised, on the death of a relative, by his servant inquiring 'whether his master would inform the *bees* of the event, or whether *he* should do so'. On asking the meaning of so strange a question, the servant assured him that bees ought always to be informed of a death in the family, or they would resent the neglect by deserting the hive. One of the party present took the opportunity of testing the prevalence of this strange notion, by inquiring of a cottager who had lately lost a relative, and happened to complain of the loss of her bees, 'whether she had told them all she ought to do?' She immediately replied, 'Oh, yes; when my aunt died I told every skep [hive] myself, and put them into mourning.'"

"Who would believe," writes John Molle in 1621, "without superstition, (if experience did not make it credible), that most commonly all the bees die in their hives if the master or mistress of the house chance to die, except the hives be presently removed to some other place? And yet I know this hath happened to folk no way stained with superstition." This seems to have been translated by Molle from the *Historical Meditations* of Joachim Camerarius, one of the great scholars of the Renaissance.

In America, as in England, this superstition of "telling the bees" still lingers in remote country spots, and forms the subject of the poem by Whittier called *Telling the Bees,* the last lines of which run:

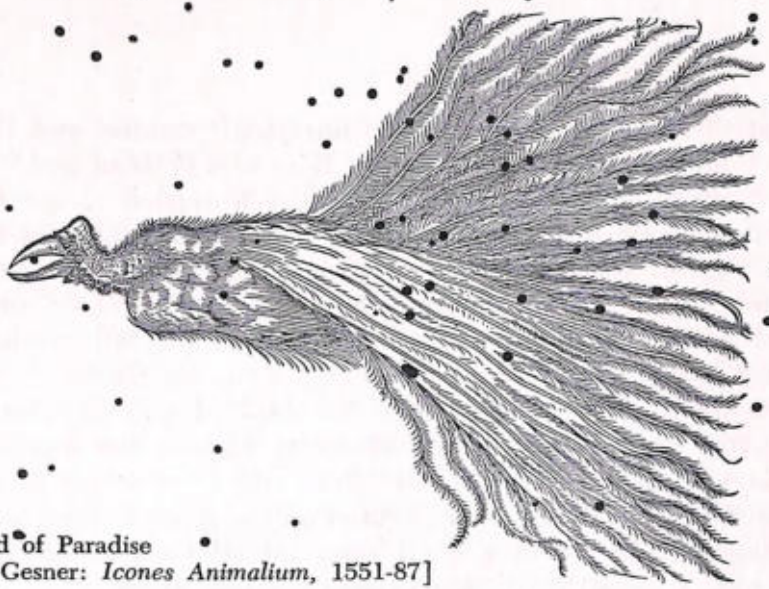
> Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence!
> Mistress Mary is dead and gone!

In France and in Switzerland the same belief occurs, and Paul Sebillot, in his *Le Folklore de France,* tells us that the accepted method is to address the bees politely, and tell them *"Belles, votre maître est mort."* It is curious to note that in France, as in England, great stress was laid on the fact that the bees must always be spoken to civilly. Miss Ransome tells of a Northumbrian who once remarked: "It wouldn't do to swear before the bees. They'd pretty soon leave the place."

How did this superstition come about? Sir Laurence Gomme, in *Ethnology in Folklore,* says: "This message to the bees is clearly best explained, I think, as being given to the winged messengers of the gods, so that they may carry the news to spirit land, of the speedy arrival of a newcomer."

Mark Twain was well acquainted with the legend, for in *Huckleberry Finn,* the Negro says to Huck: "If a man owned a beehive and the man died, the bees must be told about it before sun-up next morning, or else the bees would all weaken down and quit work and die."

BIRDS



Bird of Paradise
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

The Bird of Paradise

None knowes their nest, none knowes the dam that breeds them:
Foodless they live, for th'aire alonely feeds them;
Wingless they fly; and yet their flight extends
Till with their flight their unknown lives-date ends.
Du Bartas: Divine Weekes & Works

"Questi ucceli sonno grossi como tordi" – "these birds are of the size of thrushes," wrote Antonio Pigafetta,* "and have a small head and long beak. Their legs are a *palmo* [i.e. three to four inches] in length and slender as a reed. They have no wings, but in their stead long feathers of various colours like great plumes. Their tale resembles that of the thrush. All the rest of the feathers except the wings are of a tawny colour. They never fly except when there is a wind. We were told

*Pigafetta accompanied Magellan on his journey round the world.

that these birds came from the terrestrial paradise and that they are called *bolon divata*, that is to say, birds of god."

Pigafetta was probably not the first European to see the bird of paradise, for Nicolò de' Conti, who left Venice for the East about the year 1420 and spent nine months in Java, refers to a "remarkable bird resembling a wood pigeon without feet and with an oblong tail," the skin and tail of which were highly prized and used as ornaments for the head. His description may well refer to the bird of paradise, for it became the custom of the natives to remove the legs and wings of the bird sold to travellers, which gave rise to the belief that the birds never alighted on the ground. They were thought to fly for ever, their faces turned towards the sun, dropping to earth only when death overtook them.

Such a theory at once raises the question of nests and parentage, but the old writers overcame this difficulty by asserting that the female laid her eggs on the male bird's back and hatched them as they flew endlessly through the skies. There were some who suggested rather boldly that perhaps they took a well-earned rest from time to time by hanging from the branches of trees by means of their thread-like tail feathers.

Sir Thomas Herbert, as late as 1677, was still propagating the idea that this bird was footless, for in his description of the Moluccas he writes: "In these isles only are found those rare and beautiful Birds of the Sun which are commonly called *Manucaudiatae* or Birds of Paradise. He is of the bigness of a Parrot; the feathers upon his head so small as rather to resemble hair than feathers; his train thick and very long but curiously coloured, in some parts of his body green, in others yellow. Feet he has none; yet his wings be large and of a bright colour; in flying he mounts exceeding high and continues long in motion; a bird for its rarity much esteemed by travellers and not without superstition by the natives."

The Belgian naturalist Charles de l'Ecluse (Carolus Clusius)

was possibly the first to realize that the birds brought back from the Spice Islands were not complete birds, but only skins artfully and skilfully prepared. But the public, which prefers exciting fantasy to humdrum fact, took little heed of what the Leyden professor had to say. And although Georg Eberhart Rumpf wrote, soon after 1700, an observant treatise on the natural history of Amboina, where he had lived for years, the volume which dealt with birds was mysteriously lost while still in manuscript. One man, however, had been shown this work. His name was François Valentijn, and in 1726 he brought out his own treatise on the birds of Amboina, in which he not only pirated much of Rumpf's work, but worse still, falsified it, giving credence once more to the old stories. It was long before the legend of the legless bird was dispelled, for even the great naturalist Buffon included in his great *History of Birds* (1775) an account of the bird of paradise by Pierre Sonnerat in which many of the old tales are revived, though Sonnerat at least did not repeat the footless fowl legend.

The name *Manucaudiata,* which Sir Thomas Herbert and other writers employed, was the Latinized form of the Malay name for the *Paradiesea minor,* which they called *manuq-dewata,* or bird of the gods, and the name remained the accepted form for a century or more. The story that these birds lived on nothing but dew and the nectar of spice trees led Dryden to write, hinting at Charles II's niggardly treatment of the arts and literature:

> Fed from his hand they sung and flew
> Like birds of Paradise that liv'd on morning dew.

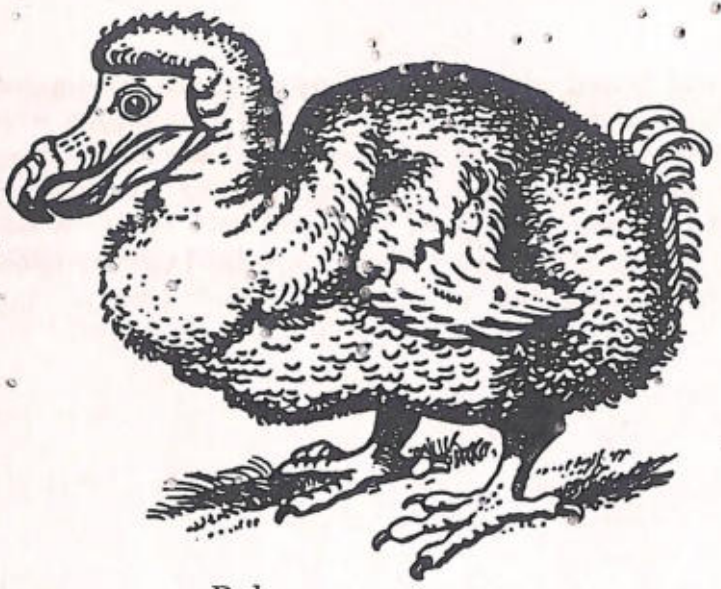
Strangely enough for the mystery of the bird of paradise was not completely solved until the nineteenth century. About 1820, the Dutchman Coenraad Temminck, having founded in Leyden a museum for the study of natural history, sent an expedition of young naturalists to the region of the Malay

archipelago and the East Indies to undertake zoological research there. Although many remarkable creatures were found of which no previous description had been made, no news arrived in Holland of the bird of paradise, and before any specimens of this *rara avis* could be obtained, almost every member of the expedition had succumbed to the climate.

But while they were searching, another man had solved the mystery. René Primevère Lesson was a member of the crew of the French vessel *La Coquille*. They were searching for the ship of the explorer La Pérouse, which had disappeared after touching at Botany Bay in 1788. In 1828 it was ascertained that his ship had been wrecked on one of the Queen Charlotte Islands. Lesson, on his return to France, published his *Journal d'un voyage pittoresque autour du monde*, in which he described a brief visit to New Guinea. There he had come across many of the beautiful birds of paradise, and had seen how the Papuans caught them and prepared them for the market. This they did by removing the bones and certain thick parts of the skin, taking care not to remove any of the feathers, stretching the carcass on a frame and rubbing wood ash into it to harden and preserve it, the framework causing the bird to retain its shape. It was then taken off and the skin perfectly dried over a fire. What remained was the ethereal bird with its gorgeous plumage which, in the words of Gesner, "never sits upon the earth or any other thing, being born in Paradise." The drawing of the bird of Paradise shown in Gesner's *Historia Animalium* was made from one of these prepared carcasses.

The first man to make a proper study of the bird of paradise, for Lesson had passed no more than a fortnight in New Guinea, was Alfred Russell Wallace, who spent several years in that territory, from 1858 to 1862. He delivered the first specimens of their kind to be seen in England to the London Zoo. In the record of his travels Wallace relates the wonder which filled him as he wandered through the luxuriant tropical

forests and "gazed upon the bird of paradise, the quintessence, of beauty. I thought of the long vanished ages during which generation after generation of this creature had passed through their evolution, during which young birds of paradise were brought into the world, grew up, lived, and died – in dark, gloomy forests, where no intelligent eye beheld their loveliness. And I wondered at this lavish squandering of beauty."



Dodo
[*Roelandt Savery*]

The Defunct Dodo

"Why," said the Dodo, "the best way to explain it is to do it."
Lewis Carroll: Alice in Wonderland

Admiral Jacob van Neck, who took possession of the Island of Mauritius in September, 1598, on the orders of Count Maurice of Nassau (after whom it was named), was the first man to give a description of that now extinct bird, the dodo. He wrote:

"Blue parrots are very numerous there, as well as other birds; among which are a kind, conspicuous for their size, larger than our swans, with huge heads only half covered with skin, as if clothed with a hood. These birds lack wings, in the place of which three or four blackish feathers protrude. The tail consists of a few soft incurved feathers which are

ash-coloured. These we used to call *Walghvogels,*° for the reason that the longer and oftener they were cooked, the less soft and more insipid eating they became. Nevertheless their belly and breast were of a pleasant flavour and easily masticated."

None of the sailors had ever seen a bird like this before; and so grotesque was it in appearance that, had it not lived until comparatively recently and sat for its portrait on more than one occasion, no one would believe that such a bird actually existed. But painted it was, for several live specimens were taken to Europe and more than a dozen portraits of the dodo were made during the first half of the seventeenth century, no fewer than eight paintings having been made by Roelandt Savery of Courtrai, a pupil of Jan Brueghel.

One live dodo was exhibited at a raree show in London, for Sir Hamon L'Estrange saw it. "About 1638," he writes, "as I walked London streets, I saw the picture of a strange fowle hong out upon a cloth, and myselfe with one or two more then in company went in to see it. It was kept in a chamber, and was a great fowle somewhat bigger than the largest Turkey Cock, and so legged and footed, but stouter and thicker, and of a more erect shape." The keeper, he said, called it a dodo. How that name originated is not known for certain, but it is generally thought to have come from the Portuguese *duodo,* meaning a simpleton, possibly because of its rather stupid appearance.

A stuffed dodo was for a time exhibited among the collection of curiosities assembled in South Lambeth by the naturalist John Tradescant, and is described in the catalogue of the *Musaeum Tradescantianum* (1656) as the "Dodar from the Island of Mauritius." This specimen eventually went to the Museum at Oxford, where it was thrown out by order of the Vice-Chancellor in 1755, when the bird was already extinct.

°Literally, "nauseating birds."

Fortunately someone preserved the head and one foot, which are still there.

That famous traveller Sir Thomas Herbert mentions the dodo in his *Some Yeares Travels into Africa and Asia the Great* (1677), and gives a drawing of the bird on page 383. He describes it as "a bird the Dutch call *Walghvogel* or *Dod Eersen;* her body is round and fat which occasions the slow pace or that her corpulencie; and so great as few of them weigh less than 50 pound: meat it is with some, but better to the eye than stomach; such as only a strong appetite can vanquish. But otherwise, through its oyliness it cannot chuse but quickly cloy and nauseate the stomach, being indeed more pleasureable to look than feed upon. It is of a melancholy visage, as sensible of Natures injury in framing so massie a body to be directed by complemental wings, such indeed as are unable to hoiste her from the ground, serving only to rank her amongst Birds: her head is variously drest, for one half is hooded with down of a dark colour; the other half naked, and of a white hue, as if Lawn were drawn over it. Her bill hooks and bends downwards, the thrill or breathing place is in the midst, from which part to the end the colour is of a light green mixt with a pale yellow. Her eyes are round and bright, and instead of feathers she has a most fine down. Her train (like to a *Chyna* beard) is no more than three or four short feathers; her leggs are thick and black; her tallons great; her stomach fiery so as she can easily digest stones – in that shape not a little resembling the ostrich." And it was as an "ostrich" that Francis Willoughby later classified it.

It was unfortunate for the dodo that it could not fly, for it was easy prey to the crews of ships laying in provisions at Mauritius; even if its flesh was unpalatable to an Admiral van Neck or Sir Thomas Herbert, to the common sailor it made a welcome change from the monotonous diet of the lower deck. When settlements grew up on Mauritius the domestic animals – dogs and pigs – ate the dodo's eggs, and

the rats with which ships in those days were infested came ashore and killed the young chicks. In less than a hundred years after the discovery of the dodo that bird was extinct. By the end of the eighteenth century no one was living on the island who knew of the former existence of the bird with the queer name. Another variety of the dodo, found on Isle de Bourbon (later Réunion), lasted about fifty years longer.

When, later, zoologists tried to fit the dodo into a recognizable category, they found it no easy matter, for all they had to go on were the descriptions of the early explorers, a few fragments of the actual bird, and the several paintings which had been made in the seventeenth century. Following Willoughby, John Ray, Linnaeus, and Nicholas Vigors, Secretary of the Zoological Society of London, all classified it as a short-legged variety of ostrich. But the French naturalist Ducrotay de Blainville held that it was a vulture, despite the fact, as other zoologists pointed out, that it was not a bird of prey, but a grain eater. Later still, the ornithologist Hugh Strickland advanced the then surprising theory that it was a member of the dove family – in fact, a giant dove that had lost the power of flight, like the New Zealand moa, another extinct species. Strickland's pronouncement, based upon a careful study of the Savery pictures, was received with scepticism, and it was not vindicated until soon after the middle of the nineteenth century, when specimens of the Samoan toothed dove arrived in England.

The Ostrich or Sparrow Camel

The estridge that will eate
An horseshowe so great.
In the stead of meate
Such fervent heat
His stomach doth freat.
John Skelton: Phyllyp Sparowe

Belief in the abnormal digestive powers of the ostrich was long-lived. In his *Euphues* Lyly writes: "The Estrich digesteth harde yron to preserve his health," and in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2,* Jack Cade tells Iden: "I'll make thee eat iron like an ostrich, and swallow my sword like a great pin, ere thou and I part." Pliny said the ostrich could digest anything, though he was probably thinking of ordinary foodstuffs. Leo Africanus, quoted by Purchas, says: "The ostrich is a silly and deafe creature, feeding upon anything which it findeth, be it as hard and indigestibel as yron." But he did not say that the ostrich actually ate iron. However, one version of the *Physiologus,* quoted in Carlill,* goes even further and states: "It is also related of him that he swallows even glowing iron and fiery coals; and all these do good to his stomach, for his nature is very cold."

Sir Thomas Browne remarks that the common opinion that the ostrich digests iron is affirmed by swarms of writers and is so common a belief that "the common picture also confirmeth it, which usually describeth this animal with a horseshoe in its mouth." Browne confesses that although he has seen an ostrich he has never been able to prove the point by experiment, but, he says, "I have received great occasion of doubt from learned discourses thereon." Aristotle and Oppian, he says, are both silent about this singularity, and some writers, he notes, "have experimentally refuted it, as Albertus Magnus, and most plainly Ulysses Aldrovandus." The last-

*Physiologus. Translated, with an Introduction by James Carlill, 1924.

named writes that "being at Trent, I observed the ostrich to swallow iron, but yet to exclude it undigested again."

When the ostrich first came to the knowledge of Europeans it must have seemed a very strange creature indeed, unlike any bird with which they were familiar. In fact, for some time it was thought to be part bird and part beast, and Browne terms it a Struthiocamelus, or Sparrow Camel. For a very long time naturalists were undecided whether to place it among the birds or whether, on account of its great feet and strong legs devoid of feathers, to classify it among the hoofed beasts.

Although the largest of the species of running birds, such as the cassowary and the emu, even the ostrich would appear puny by the side of the moa, which disappeared some 500 years ago, having been hunted to the point of extermination by the Maoris. The moa of New Zealand is thought to have been one of the largest birds ever known, and stood over twelve feet high. A moa's egg in the British Museum is said to have a liquid capacity of nearly two and a half gallons!

Another gigantic bird, now likewise extinct, lived in Madagascar and was given by the French zoologist Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire the scientific name of *Aepyornis maximus*. A letter written in 1832 by a traveller in Madagascar named Sganzin to the French naturalist Jules Verreaux tells how the natives of the island used the gigantic eggs of this bird as storage vessels for liquids, for they measured three feet from tip to base and about thirty inches round the middle.

No one knows just when the Aepyornis disappeared, though Alfred Wallace believed that it still existed in Madagascar less than 300 years ago. Others think it became extinct much earlier. Possibly the ostrich itself would have disappeared by now had it not been for the fact that its plumes formed a most decorative article of apparel. During the Second Empire in France, ostrich feathers were in such demand that breeders established the first ostrich farms in Algeria. Today South Africa is the great centre of ostrich farming.

The Owl: Minerva's Bird

Ophelia: Well, God 'ild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter.

Shakespeare: Hamlet

The quotation above refers to an old Gloucestershire legend which tells how the Lord went into a baker's shop for something to eat. The baker put a cake into the oven, but his daughter exclaimed that it was far too large, and reduced its size by half. But the dough swelled to an enormous size, and the daughter cried out in amazement, "Heugh! heugh! heugh!" and was thereupon turned into an owl.

It is hardly surprising that the owl has attracted to itself a vast number of legends, for it is a bird whose appearance and habits are so much at variance with the majority of the feathered world. Its strange and solemn countenance, its nocturnal habits, its desolate haunts, and its weird hooting, all combine to give the owl a rather sinister image. Shakespeare conjures up a remarkable atmosphere of supernatural terror in these lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Now the wasted brands do glow,
Whilst the scritch-owl, scritching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe,
In remembrance of a shroud.
Now it is the time of night,
That the graves all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite,
In the church-way paths to glide.

In the Bible the owl is usually associated with desolation, and the thirty-fourth chapter of Isaiah abounds in such instances. Here the prophet foretells of the city of evil, that "it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever.

But the cormorant and the bittern shall possess it; the owl also and the raven [both birds of ill omen] shall dwell in it . . . the screech owl also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest. There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow; there shall the vultures also be gathered, every one with her mate."

In ancient times the appearance of an owl in cities was thought to be an omen of disaster. Rome itself once had to undergo a lustration, namely, a purification by ceremonial washing or other rites, because an owl strayed into the capitol— an event which Butler thus satirized in his *Hudibras*:

> The Roman senate, when within
> The city walls an owl was seen,
> Did cause their clergy with lustrations
> (Our synod calls humiliations)
> The round-fac'd prodigy t'avert
> From doing town and country hurt.

The owl, like the raven, was looked upon by our ancestors with awe and abhorrence as an omen of misfortune and death. We read in *Macbeth*:

> It was the owl that shriek'd; that fatal bellman
> Which giv'st the stern'st good night.

And Bartholomew Glanville writes: "Of the oule. Divynours telle that they betokyn evyll; for if the owle be seen in a citie it signifyeth distruccion and waste, as Isidore sayth." The Isidore referred to is Isidore of Seville, on whose *Origines*, written in the seventh century, writers of the Middle Ages drew heavily. But the idea is as old as man, and Pliny says: "The scritch owle betokeneth alwaies some heavie newes, and is most execrable and accursed." Both Lucan and Claudian spoke of the "sinister owl."

No one can say that the owl has been neglected in English literature, for there is hardly one of the great poets and

dramatists who does not utilize the power of its name in suggesting melancholy, misfortune and death. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Milton, Chatterton, Gray, Scott, Coleridge and dozens more have dwelt on the terror aroused by this nocturnal wanderer.

In the ancient pharmacopoeia the owl was a specific for many ills. All that the sufferer from gout had to do was to "take an owl, pull off her feathers, salt her well for a week, then put her into a pot and stop it close, and put her into an oven, that so she may be brought into a mummy." But that is not all. It had then to be ground to a powder and mixed with boar's grease. If "the grieved place" was treated with this ointment it soon got better.

This disrepute into which the owl so largely fell was mainly due to the ancient Romans. Almost everything the Romans undertook was carried out only if the gods were favourable to their undertaking; and to learn the will of the gods the Romans looked to their augurs, who alone had the knowledge necessary for taking the auspices. Most of the science of augury came from the Etruscans, and the Etruscan *haruspices* were firmly of the opinion that the owl was a bird of ill omen. Pliny writes in his *Natural History* that "the owl is of mournful import, and more to be dreaded than all other birds in auspices connected with the State. It inhabits waste places, and those not merely deserts, but dreadful and inaccessible localities; being a prodigy of night, making its voice heard in no manner of song, but rather in groaning. So whenever seen in cities or in daylight it is a direful portent."

In ancient Greece, on the other hand, no ill fame surrounded the owl. In Athens it was regarded as a symbol of wisdom and became the bird of Pallas Athene (Minerva). The abundance of owls in the Greek city gave rise to the proverb of "taking owls to Athens," on a par with the British "carrying coals to Newcastle." Throughout most of the history of Athenian coinage, the drachma bore on one side the head

of Pallas Athene and on the other an owl, and the coins were themselves referred to as "owls."

"That owls and ravens are ominous appearers," writes Sir Thomas Browne, "and presignifying unlucky events, as Christians yet conceit, was an augurial conception. Because many ravens were seen when Alexander entered Babylon, they were thought to preominate his death; and because an owl appeared before the battle [with the Parthians] it presaged the ruin of Crassus. Which, though decrepit superstitions, and such as had their nativity in times beyond all history, are fresh in the observation of many heads, and by the credulous and feminine party still in some majesty among us. And therefore the emblem of superstition was well set out by Ripa, in the picture of an owl, a hare, and an old woman."

In French folklore the owl acquired an evil reputation for another reason. According to an old legend the wren brought down fire from heaven, whereupon all the other birds, out of gratitude, gave it a feather apiece to replace its scorched plumage; all, that is, except the owl, who put forward the excuse that she would need all her feathers to keep warm during the winter. Because of this the owl was condemned to be excluded from the daylight warmth of the sun and to endure perpetual cold during the night.

Pliny, although he repeats many of the legends current in his day, was more sceptical than many of the ancient writers. Although credulous, as most people were in his day, there were certain superstitions which he was not prepared to swallow. "The feet of a schriche Owle burnt together with the herb Plumbago," he tells us, "is very good against serpents. But before I write further of this bird I cannot overpasse the vanitie of Magicians which herein appeareth most evidently; for over and besides many other monstrous lies which they have devised, they give it out that if one doe lay the heart of a Schrich-Owle on the left pap of a woman as she lies asleep, she will disclose and utter all the secrets of her heart; also,

The Pious Pelican

To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms
And, like the kind, life-rendering pelican,
Refresh them with my blood.

Shakespeare: Hamlet

The ancient belief that the pelican nourished its young with its own blood, heraldically described as "a Pelican in her piety, vulning herself," made that bird a constantly recurring symbol not only in books of devotion but also in the emblem books which were so popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. The emblematic engraving was usually accompanied by a short rhyming explanation, such as this from Mildmay Fane's *Otia Sacra,* published in 1648:

Behold Here from the Pelican's Brest sprung
A stream of precious blood to feed her young

The origin of this fable may have arisen from the habit of the pelican, while feeding its young, of pressing against its breast feathers with its beak, the tip of which is bright red in colour and might look like a spot of blood upon the breast. On the other hand the story may have been suggested by the Egyptian legend of Horus ordering the vulture to save its young by feeding them with flesh from its thigh.

In the account of his second voyage to the coast of Guinea in the 1560's, Sir John Hawkins wrote: "Of the sea-fowle above all other not common in England, I noted the pellicane, which is fained to be the lovingst bird that is; but for all this lovingnesse she is very deformed to behold . . . her big throat and long bill both make her seem so ougly."

A charming story is related of the pelican which became a mascot of the emperor Maximilian. This bird settled one day upon a rocky eminence near Mechlin (Malines) in the Netherlands, and, taking this to be an augury, Maximilian's

whosoever carries about them the same heart when they go to fight, shal be more hardie, and perform their devoir the better against their enemies."

It was undoubtedly the appearance of the owl which gave it an ill-omened reputation among the Romans, and on the other hand a reputation for wisdom among the Greeks. The great staring eyes are one of the popular attributes of demons and goblins, while there is no doubt that the solemnity of aspect which its broad head and piercing eyes impart give it a stern, judicial appearance.

In the issue of *Punch* dated April 10, 1875, appeared a drawing by L. Sambourne, portraying the owl as Punch, and beneath was the following rhymed quatrain:

> There was an owl lived in an oak,
> The more he heard the less he spoke,
> The less he spoke the more he heard —
> O, if men were all like that wise bird.

But whereas to the ancient Greeks the owl was a symbol of wisdom, to medieval theologians the bird's nocturnal habits made them take the owl as a symbol of the Jews who preferred the darkness of their own beliefs to the broad daylight of Christianity. A misericord in Norwich Cathedral has a wonderfully carved representation of an owl being mobbed by other birds.

The Pious Pelican

To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms
And, like the kind, life-rendering pelican,
Refresh them with my blood.

Shakespeare: Hamlet

The ancient belief that the pelican nourished its young with its own blood, heraldically described as "a Pelican in her piety, vulning herself," made that bird a constantly recurring symbol not only in books of devotion but also in the emblem books which were so popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. The emblematic engraving was usually accompanied by a short rhyming explanation, such as this from Mildmay Fane's *Otia Sacra*, published in 1648:

Behold Here from the Pelican's Brest sprung
A stream of precious blood to feed her young

The origin of this fable may have arisen from the habit of the pelican, while feeding its young, of pressing against its breast feathers with its beak, the tip of which is bright red in colour and might look like a spot of blood upon the breast. On the other hand the story may have been suggested by the Egyptian legend of Horus ordering the vulture to save its young by feeding them with flesh from its thigh.

In the account of his second voyage to the coast of Guinea in the 1560's, Sir John Hawkins wrote: "Of the sea-fowle above all other not common in England, I noted the pellicane, which is fained to be the lovingst bird that is; but for all this lovingnesse she is very deformed to behold . . . her big throat and long bill both make her seem so ougly."

A charming story is related of the pelican which became a mascot of the emperor Maximilian. This bird settled one day upon a rocky eminence near Mechlin (Malines) in the Netherlands, and, taking this to be an augury, Maximilian's

father built a castle there. The story goes that the pelican, by now quite tame, wandered about the fortress during its construction and when it was completed loved to perch, like a sentinel, upon the battlements and towers. Maximilian adopted the bird and for fifty-six years, we are told, it drew a pension of fourpence a day. Wherever the army went the pelican went also, flying high above the marching soldiers. The longevity of this particular pelican must have been considerably exaggerated.

Bartholomew Glanville tells the old legend in a slightly different form. In Book XII of Berthelet's edition of 1535 we read:

"There be two manner Pelicans: one dwelleth in water, and eateth fish, and the other dwelleth on land and loveth wilderness and eateth venomous beasts, as lizards and other such. When the Pelican's children be haught [grown] and begin to wax hoar they smite the father and the mother in the face wherefore the mother smiteth them again and slayeth them. And the third day the mother smiteth herself in her side that the blood runneth out and sheddeth that hot blood upon the bodies of her children, and by virtue of the blood the birds, that were before dead, quicken again.

"The Pelican is a bird with great wings and most lean; for all that he swalloweth passeth forth anon behind; for he hath a right slipper gut, and therefore he may not hold meat till it be incorporate. And the serpent hateth kindly [i.e. naturally] this bird, wherefore when the mother passeth out of the nest to get meat the serpent climbeth on the tree and stingeth and infecteth the birds, and when the mother cometh again she maketh sorrow three days for her birds. Then she smiteth herself in the breast and springeth blood upon them and reareth them from death to life."

In this passage we see clearly the influence of the *Physiologus* and the theologians, the parable being that the Lord, even when we have struck him in the face by rejecting

his teachings, can raise us from the dead to life eternal. The pelican was much in use as an ecclesiastical symbol. The sixteenth-century printer Richard Jugge, who worked at the sign of *The Bible,* used the pelican in her piety as his printer's mark.

How the Raven Became Black

The boding raven on her cottage sat,
And with hoarse croakings warned us of our fate.
Gay

The raven was often termed the Devil's bird, and it was thought to be a bird of ill omen, especially if it was seen on the left hand. Bartholomew Glanville writes: "And as divinours mene the raven hath a maner virtue of meanyng and tokenynge of divination. And therefore among nations, the raven among foules was halowed to Apollo, as Mercius saythe." Because an exceptional number of ravens were seen when Alexander entered Babylon, this was thought to presage his imminent death. Sir Thomas Browne comments on this superstition in his *Vulgar Errors*: "The Raven, by his acute sense of smelling, discerns the savour of the dying bodies at the tops of chimnies, and that makes them flutter about the windows, as they use to do in the search of a carcass. Now because wherever they do this, it is an evident sign that the sick party seldom escapes death; thence ignorant people count them ominous, as foreboding death, and in some kind as causing death, whereof they have a sense indeed, but are no cause at all." So, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, we read:

O it comes o'er my memory
As doth the raven, o'er the infected house,
Boding to all.

Originally, so legend has it, the raven was white. There are two versions of how this change came about, but in both cases the offence which caused it was disobedience. According to an ancient legend of the Greeks, Apollo sent a raven to a spring to fetch water. Near the spring grew a fig tree, and when the bird arrived it found that the figs were nearly ripe.

The temptation to remain there until they were ready for eating was too great for the raven to resist. But how to account for the delay? After he had gorged upon the ripe figs the raven seized a water snake that was basking near the spring and carried it back to the god, explaining that the snake had drunk the spring dry. Knowing this to be false, Apollo turned the disobedient raven's plumage from white to black, condemned it to suffer continuously the pangs of thirst, and changed its hitherto melodious voice into a dismal croak.

A different version came from the pens of the medieval chroniclers, who averred that the real reason for this transformation was the raven's disobedience in not returning to the Ark of Noah but staying outside the vessel to feed upon the bodies of the drowned.

To most ears the hoarse croak of the raven is a monotonous sound; yet Bartholomew assures us that "among fowls, only the raven hath four and sixty changings of voice." Another item of recondite information, given to us by ancient writers, concerning this bird, is that the raven, when it has killed a chameleon, counteracts the poison injected by the latter by eating the leaves of the laurel.

Another legend, common to many ancient writers, regarding the raven, was that it never fed its young until their final colouring was visible. In the words of Bartholomew: "The Raven beholdeth the mouth of her birds when they yawn. But she giveth them no meat ere she know and see the likeness of her own blackness, and of her own colour and feathers; and when they begin to wax black, then afterward she feedeth them with all her might and strength. Raven's birds be fed with dew of heaven all the time that they have no black feathers." Guillim also refers to this extraordinary belief in his *Display of Heralary*, and another writer on heraldry, Legh, likewise declares that "the Raven delighteth so much in her owne bewty that when her birds are hatched she will give them no meate untill she see whether they will bee of

her owne colour or no." This apparent lack of maternal care may have had its origin in Psalm 147:9: "He giveth to the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry."

In Scandinavian folklore the raven was a bird sacred to Odin; the early Christians made him the bird of St. Martin, who was credited with possessing powers of prophecy similar to those of Odin.

Perhaps the quaintest story concerning the raven is that found in Albertus Magnus' *Of the Virtues of Animals,* in which that writer informs us that "if a Raven's egg be boiled and put again in the nest, straightway the Raven goes to a certain island in the Red Sea where Aldoricus or Alodrius is buried, and brings a stone with which it toucheth its eggs, and immediately they become raw as they were before. . . . Now if that stone be set in a ring, with a laurel-leaf under it, and a man bound with chains or a closed gate be touched [with it] straightway the bound shall be loosed and the gate be opened. And if that stone be put in the ear, it gives understanding of all birds."

The idea that stones of mystic virtue were to be found in many animals was one of the quaint conceits of ancient and medieval lore. Stones, too, that were found by birds and animals in particular places were also credited with supernatural powers. The swallow, for instance, was supposed to be able to find by the seashore a stone which would restore sight, and Longfellow alludes to this fancy in *Evangeline* when he writes:

> Seeking with eager eyes that wondrous stone which the swallow
> Brings from the shore of the sea to restore the sight of her fledglings.

An old Cornish legend avers that King Arthur still lives in the guise of a raven, and for this reason the superstitious will not kill these birds for fear that they might by mischance

destroy the mythical warrior. (This belief exists also in connection with the chough.)

We all remember how Noah sent out the raven and the dove to see whether the waters had abated. The raven never returned and only the dove came back after a time with the olive leaf, symbol of hope, in her beak. This scriptural allusion, allied with the opposition in colour of the two birds, made the dove the emblem of peace and hope, while the raven became that of the Devil.

Among the queer concoctions brewed by quack doctors in the olden days was "raven broth," made by burning the young birds and reducing their bones to powder, which was then given to "ye seke man to drynkeyn," mixed presumably with wine or other liquid. This was reckoned to be a sure remedy for the gout.

Swan Song

The swans on sweet St. Mary's lake
Float double, swan and shadow.
Wordsworth: Yarrow Unvisited

For hundreds of years there was a belief that the swan sang just before its death, so that the expression "swan song" passed into proverbial use for a dying speech. Shakespeare makes frequent reference to this belief, which occurs in most of the ancient authors; though Pliny has his doubts, for he writes: "Some say that the Swans sing lamentably just before their death; but untruly, I suppose, for my experience with several has showed the contrary."

Nevertheless, however much other authors may have known that *Cygnus olor,* the mute swan, did not, in fact, "chaunt sweet strains with his dying tongue," the conceit was too poetical to relinquish. It may be that the ancients confused the mute swan with the Hooper swan, but it would be stretching poetical licence to the limit to call the cry of the latter a "sweet strain."

In the twenty-seventh chapter of the third book of his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica,* Sir Thomas Browne treats "compendiously of the musical note of Swans before their death," and tells us that "from great antiquity, and before the melody of Syrens, the musical note of swans hath been commended, and that they sing most sweetly before their death: for thus we read in Plato, that from the opinion of *Metempsychosis,* or transmigration of the souls of men into the bodies of beasts most suitable unto their human condition, after his death Orpheus the musician became a swan; thus was it the bird of Apollo, the god of music, by the Greeks; and an hieroglyphick of music among the Egyptians, from whom the Greeks derived the conception; — hath been the affirmation of many Latins, and hath not wanted assertors almost from every

nation." After a great deal of learned discussion, he refutes the story of Aldrovandi "concerning the music of the swans on the river of Thames, near London." For he says, with his fondness for lengthy Latinisms, "no latirostrous animal [i.e. broad- or shovel-beaked] were ever commended for their note."

Summing up, he declares: "When, therefore, we consider the dissension of authors, the falsity of relations, the indisposition of the organs, and the immusical note of all we have ever beheld or heard of, if generally taken, and comprehending all swans, or of all places, we cannot assent thereto. Surely he that is bit with a *tarantula* shall never be cured by this music; and with the same hopes we expect to hear the harmony of the spheres."

Another belief, long popular in the south of England, was that swans were hatched during a thunderstorm. This superstition is a very old one, for Lord Northampton, in his *Defensative against the Poyson of Supposed Prophecies* (1583), writes: "It chaunceth sometimes to thunder about that time and season of the yeare when swannes hatch their young; and yet no doubt it is a paradox of simple men to thinke that a swanne cannot hatch without a cracke of thunder."

Legends concerning swans abound, particularly in northern countries, a favourite one being the tale of the swan-maidens, who by means of a magic garment of swan's feathers can become maidens or swans at will. Then there is the Irish legend of Fionnuala, the daughter of King Lir, transformed by the wicked Aoife, Lir's second wife, into a swan condemned to float over the lakes and rivers of Ireland until the bells of heaven shall recall her spirit from the world. Tom Moore wrote a poem on the subject in his *Irish Melodies*.

In classical mythology Nemesis, according to a Cyprian legend, while fleeing from Zeus, took the form of a swan and dropped an egg from which came forth Helen. One of the best-known of all the tales from the Greek mythology is, of

course, that of Leda, the fair daughter of Thestios, king of Aetolia, and wife of Tundareos, king of Sparta, who was wooed by Zeus in the form of a swan, and who bore him the Dioscuri – the twin sons Castor and Polydeuces.

In 1440 an order of chivalry termed the Order of the Swan was founded by Frederick II of Brandenburg in honour of the legend of Lohengrin, the famous Knight of the Swan in old German legend. It died out in the sixteenth century, but is commemorated in England in the ale-house sign of the White Swan, first used, it is said, in honour of Anne of Cleves, the divorced wife of Henry VIII, in whose country the Order flourished. The insignia of the Order was a silver swan surmounted by the image of the Virgin Mary.

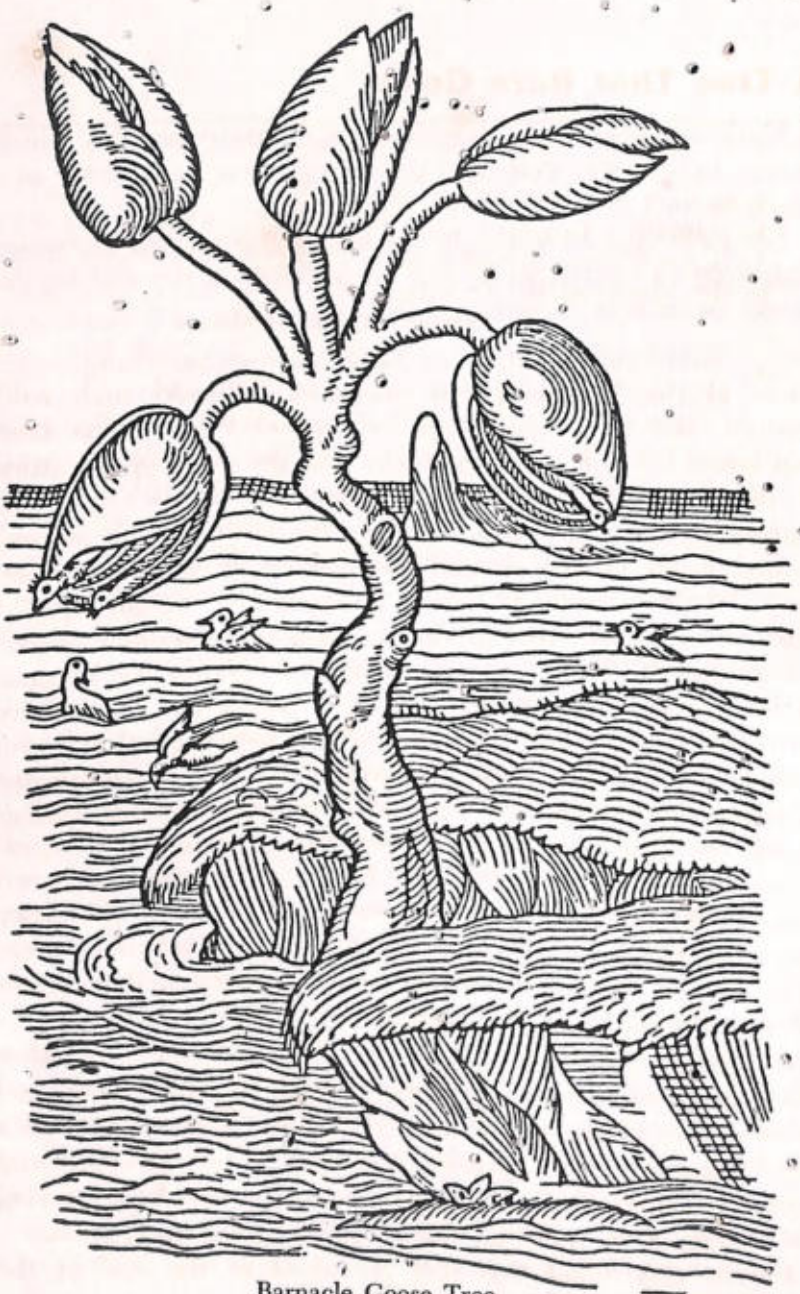
While on the subject of inn signs, one which is apt to cause confusion is that of The Swan with Two Necks. This is, in fact, a corruption of "the swan with two nicks," the emblem of the Vintners' Company. During the annual ceremony known as "swan upping," those swans which belong to the Vintners are marked, to distinguish them from those belonging to either the Crown or the Dyers' Company, by a nick on each side of the beak. Those belonging to the Dyers are marked with a single nick and those of the Crown are left unmarked. In England, all white swans in an open river, unmarked, are royalty's by prescription, and there are penalties for anyone caught stealing them. As laid down in Coke's *Reports*, "He who stealeth a swan in an open and common River, lawfully marked, the same swan shall be hung in a house by the beak, and he who stole it shall, in recompense thereof, give to the owner so much wheat as may cover all the swan by putting and turning the wheat upon the head of the swan, until the head of the swan be covered with wheat."

Except for the Australian black swan and the South American black-necked swan, all swans are white, and since these two species were not known to ornithologists in Europe until more modern times, our ancestors would have regarded

a black swan as being a contradiction in terms. For which reason Lyly writes that "it is as rare to see a rich Surety as a black Swan."

Let Coleridge have the last word on the subject of swans. Referring to certain writers of verse he gave the old legend of the swan song a neat turn, thus:

> Swans sing before they die; 'twere no bad thing
> Did certain persons die before they sing.



Barnacle Goose Tree
[Gerard: *Herbal*]

A Tree That Bore Geese

Who from the most refined of saints
As naturally turn miscreants
As barnacles turn Soland geese
In the islands of the Orcades.
Samuel Butler: Hudibras

Some of the beliefs of our ancestors betrayed such wild credulity that we cherish them for their very quaintness. One that lasted for at least six centuries was the ever-popular story of the barnacle goose. In Sir John Mandeville's *Travels,* written in the fourteenth century, the story occurs accompanied, in the edition printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1499, by a delightful woodcut which illustrates the equally quaint story of a fruit tree that produces "little lambs without wool."

Giraldus de Barri, known as Giraldus Cambrensis because of his Welsh origin, wrote in 1187: "There are here many birds which are called Bernacae, which nature produces in a manner contrary to nature, and very wonderful. They are like marsh-geese, but smaller. They are produced from fir timber tossed about at sea, and are at first like geese upon it. Afterwards they hang down by their beaks, as if from a seaweed attached to the wood, and are enclosed in shells that they may grow the more freely. Having thus, in the course of time, been clothed with a strong covering of feathers, they either fall into the water, or seek their liberty in the air by flight. . . . The eggs are not impregnated *in coitu,* like those of other birds, nor does the bird sit upon its eggs to hatch them, and in no corner of the world have they been known to build a nest." Giraldus speaks of these creatures as being engendered upon the driftwood in the sea. The more common belief during the Middle Ages was that they actually grew upon trees.

Indeed this belief was still prevalent at the end of the sixteenth century, for the botanist John Gerarde gives in his

Historie of Plants (1597) both a description and an illustration of the barnacle goose tree, which he tells us to accept as "the naked and bare truth, though unpolished." "There are found," he writes, "in the North parts of Scotland and the islands adjacent, called Orchades [i.e. the Orkneys], certaine trees whereon do grow certaine shells of a white colour tending to russett, wherein are contained little living things, which shells in time of maturitie do open, and out of them do grow those little living creatures, which falling in the water do become fowles, which we call Barnakles and in Lancashire tree-geese, but the others that do fall on land perish and come to nothing."

A nice illustration of the barnacle goose tree, with the geese coyly popping their heads out of the fruit, may be seen in the *Cosmographia* of Sebastian Münster, who says: "In Scotland there are trees which produce fruit, conglomerated of their leaves; and this fruit, when in due time it falls into the water beneath it, is endowed with new life, and is converted into a living bird, which they call the 'tree-goose'. This tree grows in the Island of Pomonia, which is not far from Scotland, towards the North. Several old Cosmographers, especially Saxo Grammaticus, mention the tree, and it must not be regarded as fictitious, as some new writers suppose." Both Gesner and Aldrovandi, and almost every naturalist of the Renaissance, believed in the curious birth of the barnacle goose.

However, Geraard de Veer, whose journey to China in 1569 is related in *Purchas his Pilgrims*, was less credulous than most of his contemporaries, and he says of the barnacle goose: "These geese were of a perfit red colour, such as come to Holland about Weiringen, and every yeere are there taken in abundance, but till this time it was never knowne where they hacht their egges, so that some men have taken upon them to write that they sit upon trees in Scotland that hang over the water, and such eggs that fall from them downe into the water become young geese, and swim there out of the water: but

those that fall upon the land burst asunder and are lost. But that is now found to be contrary, that no man could tell where they breed their eggs, for that no man that ever wee knew had ever beene under 80°; nor that land under 80° was never set downe in any card [map], much lesse the red geese that breede therein." Furthermore he declares that he and his men had seen these birds sitting on their eggs in Novaya Zemlya.

After the ignorant credulity of some of the early writers, it is a relief to discover that one seventeenth-century author, the Jesuit Gaspar Schott, would have nothing to do with the story of barnacle geese. In his *Physica Curiosa* (1662) he firmly declares that in his opinion such tales are completely without foundation, and the story that birds could be generated in such a manner was merely the repetition of a vulgar error. He further declares that these geese were hatched from eggs just like any other geese, and refers to the Dutch seamen who went with Geraard de Veer and saw the birds sitting on their eggs and hatching them, as related above.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that Sir Robert Moray, a distinguished Fellow of the Royal Society, who actually made a journey northward in 1666 to investigate the matter, saw fit to publish an account which, being published in so learned a review as the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Society, once more reinstated the error in the public mind. Describing a fir tree which he saw on the shore in the Western Isles of Scotland, he writes:

"On the parts that lay next the ground there still hung multitudes of little Shells, having within them little Birds, perfectly shap'd, supposed to be Barnacles. The Shells hung very thick and close one by another, and were of different sizes. . . . The Shells hang at the Tree by a Neck longer than the Shell, of a kind of filmy substance, round, and hollow, and creased, not unlike the Windpipe of a Chicken, spreading out broadest where it is fastened to the Tree, from which it

seems to draw and convey the matter which serves for the growth and vegetation of the Shell and the little Bird within it.

"This Bird, in every Shell that I opened, as well the least as the biggest, I found so curiously and compleatly formed, that there appeared nothing wanting as to internal parts, for making up a perfect Sea-fowl: every little part appearing so distinctly that the whole looked like a large Bird seen through a concave or diminishing glass, colour and feature being everywhere so clear and neat. The little Bill like that of a Goose; the eyes marked; the Head, Neck, Breast, Wings, Tail, and Feet formed, the Feathers everywhere perfectly shap'd, and blackish coloured; and the Feet like those of other Water-fowl. All being dead and dry, I did not look after the internal parts of them. Nor did I ever see any of the little Birds alive, nor met with anybody that did. Only some credible persons have assured me they have seen some as big as their fist."

Sir Robert Moray was subsequently contradicted by Dr. Tancred Robinson, who assured the members of the Royal Society that "the Brent Geese were bred, like other geese, from eggs laid by the females, and that the shell which it was pretended contained them had nothing in it but a 'fish', such as oysters, cockles, and all other shells."

Harpy
[Aldrovandi: *Historia Monstrorum*, 1642]

The Harpy

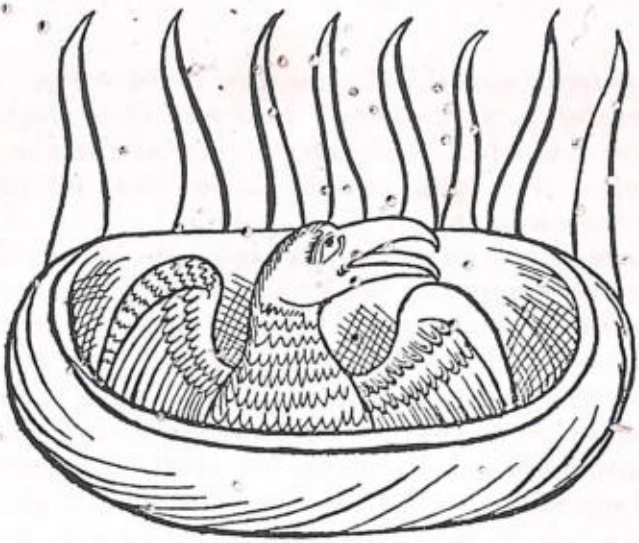
Thou art like the harpy,
Which, to betray, dost with thine angel's face,
Seize with thine eagle's talons.
Shakespeare: Pericles

The Harpy is a poetical monstrosity of classical origin – a winged creature with the head and breasts of a woman and the body and talons of an eagle. Homer mentions one Harpy, Hesiod two, and later writers three. In Greek mythology they are the daughters of Thaumas and Electra, and are probably best known from the story of the Argonauts,

where they appear as the tormentors of the blind king of Salmydessus, Phineus, whose food they stole or defiled until he almost died of starvation. In this legend the Harpies are noisome, ravenous birds, continually tormented with the pangs of an insatiable hunger.

There is a famous relief of a Harpy in the British Museum, and this came from the frieze of a monument discovered at Xanthus in Lycia. Curiously, a Harpy forms the arms of the city of Nuremberg, and is shown in Guillim's *Display of Heraldry,* in the section devoted to what that Pursuivant at Arms terms "exorbitant animals." Guillim shows another coat of arms, a shield with "a Harpey disclosed in her wings." To this he appends the following translation from Virgil.

Of monsters all, most monstrous this; no greater wrath
God sends 'mongst men; it comes from depth of pitchy Hell:
And Virgin's face, but wombe-like gulfe unsatiate hath,
Her hands are griping clawes, her colour pale and fell.



Phoenix
[*from a twelfth century bestiary*]

The Immortal Phoenix

Sol himself, glancing his golden eyes
On th' odoriferous couch wherein she lies,
Kindles the spice, and by degrees consumes
Th' immortal Phoenix, both her flesh and plumes.

But instantly out of her ashes springs
A worm, an egg then, then a bird with wings.

Du Bartas: Divine Weekes & Works

The phoenix, the Arabian bird which on the testimony of Herodotus flew every 500 years from Arabia to Heliopolis, retained a firm place in ornithological myth from the days of ancient Egypt up to the Renaissance and later. If Hesiod's fragmentary writings contain the first recorded reference to the phoenix, the second book of Herodotus has the first detailed story as related to him by the priests of Heliopolis:

"I have never seen the Phoenix myself," he writes, "save in paintings, for it is exceedingly rare and visits the land of Egypt (as I was told at Heliopolis) only at intervals of 500 years, upon the death of the parent bird. Its plumage, judging from paintings, is partly gold and partly red, while in shape and size it resembles the eagle. This is the story they relate of the Phoenix: it brings its parent all the way from Arabia enclosed in a lump of myrrh and buries the body in the temple of the Sun. In order to do this it shapes a quantity of myrrh into the form of an egg as large as it can conveniently carry. It then hollows out the lump, places the parent bird inside, and covers the hole with more myrrh. That done, it carries the egg to the temple of the Sun in Egypt." It is only fair to state that after recording this rigmarole, Herodotus says: "I tell the story as it was told to me, but I confess I do not believe it."

According to T. H. White, this story grew out of a sacred symbol used in the sun worship at Heliopolis, which may have been a stork, heron or egret. This symbol, says White, "represented the sun, which died in its own fires every night and rose from them again in the morning — rose from the east of Egypt, i.e. from Arabia."

Among the classical authors Aristotle makes no mention of the phoenix; but Ovid, Pliny and Tacitus all repeat the ancient fable that there was never more than one such bird at a time, and that this bird, when it felt the approach of death, flew from Paradise, where it had lived for centuries, first to Arabia, the land of spices. There it selected a palm tree, in the branches of which it built a nest of aromatic gums and spices, and therein it died, after having set fire to the nest. Some versions of the story say that it was the flaming hair of the sun god as he passed which set fire to the nest; but, as Tacitus wrote, "the details are uncertain."

From the ashes of the nest a new phoenix arose, and carried its parent's remains, as Herodotus related (though

Pliny calls him "the prince of liars"), to Heliopolis. There are many variants to the legend, one of which tells that it was the parent bird which flew to Heliopolis and there immolated itself in the sacrificial fire. Among the ashes was later found a tiny worm of sweet smell, which on the second day changed into the new phoenix and on the third day, fully fledged, flew back to its home in Paradise. All the classical allusions to the phoenix myth indicate an Egyptian origin, and it is quite clear that it is a solar myth.

The life of the phoenix varies in different versions of the legend. Sometimes it was 1000 years, sometimes 500, or even 1460 years – the Sothic cycle based on Sirius, by means of which the Egyptians regulated their calendar. Most of the accounts agree that it fed only on the pure air.

Bartholomew Glanville made the legend familiar during the Middle Ages, his version being that "this bird phoenix cometh wilfully into the burning nest, and is there burnt to ashes among these burning sticks, and within three days a little worm is gendered of the ashes, and waxeth little and little, and taketh feathers and is shapen and turned to a bird."

From the sixteenth century onwards English literature is full of references to the phoenix. Shakespeare, Drayton, Herrick, and a score of other poets allude to the Arabian bird, and Milton, in his *Samson Agonistes*, compares the heroic death of Samson with that of the phoenix, just as in *Paradise Lost* he likens the descent of the angel Raphael to the flight of a phoenix:

> to all the fowls he seems
> A phoenix, gazed by all, as that sole bird,
> When, to inshrine his reliques in the sun's
> Bright temple, to Egyptian Thebes he flies.

And Dryden, translating Ovid, tells of the bird:

> Self-born, begotten by the parent flame
> In which he burned; another and the same.

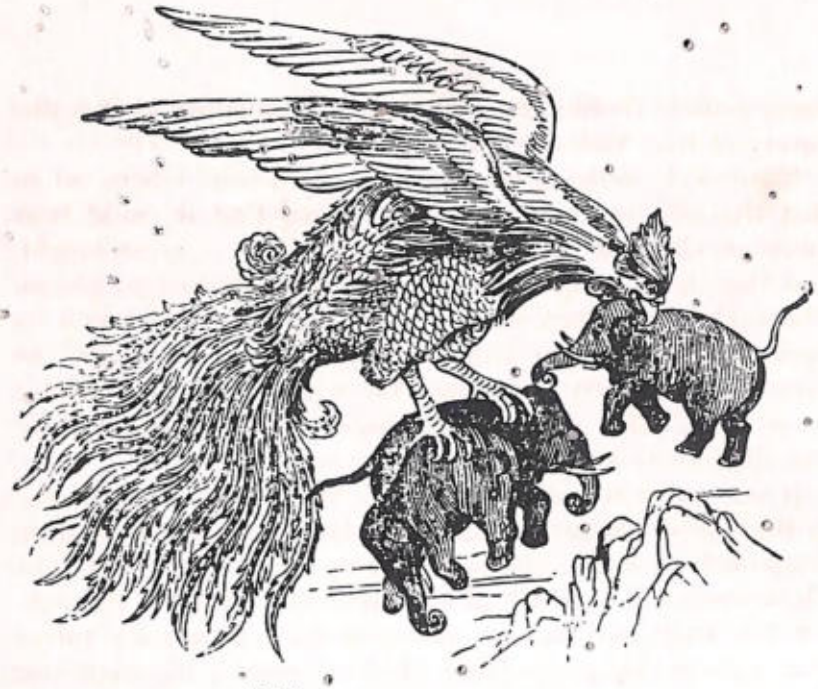
The sceptical Sir Thomas Browne did his best to deflate the legend of the phoenix. He writes:

"That there is but one phoenix in the world, which after many hundred years burneth itself, and from the ashes thereof riseth another, is a conceit not new or altogether popular, but of great antiquitie; not only delivered by human authors, but frequently expressed also by holy writers. The Scripture also seems to favour it, particularly that of Job xxi. . . . All which notwithstanding, we cannot presume the existence of this animal, nor dare we affirm there is any phoenix in nature. For first, there wants herein the definitive confirmator and test of things uncertain, that is, the sense of man. For though many writers have much enlarged hereon; yet is there not any ocular describer, or such as presumeth to confirm it upon aspection. And therefore Herodotus, that led the story unto the Greeks, plainly saith, he never attained the sight of any, but only in the picture. . . ."

Browne points out that although the phoenix is mentioned in the Book of Job, according to the Septuagint, or Greek translation, this arises from the mistranslation of the Greek word for a palm tree. In fact Browne devotes a whole chapter of the third book of his *Vulgar Errors* to demolishing the legend of the phoenix, denying not only its existence but the many questionable attributes ascribed to the fabled bird, notably its long life and the manner of its generation.

But whatever view Sir Thomas Browne advanced, Alexander Ross rejected, defending with a somewhat ludicrous obstinancy everything penned by what he called "the ancient sage." In his *Arcana Microcosmi,* or *Dr. Browne's "Vulgar Errors" refuted and answered,* Ross insists that it is no wonder the phoenix is rarely seen, its instinct teaching it to keep away from man, the great enemy of all creatures. "Had Heliogabalus, that Roman glutton, met with him, he had devoured him, though there were no more in the world!" This refers to the fact that the Roman Emperor is reputed to have given orders

for the elusive bird to be captured and served up to him as a meal, since it was thought that a man would take on the attributes of what he ate; therefore, if he could only eat an immortal creature such as the phoenix, he would as a result become immortal himself.



Rukh
[Lane: *Arabian Nights*]

The Roc or Rukh

All feathered things yet ever known to men,
From the huge ruck unto the little wren.
Drayton: Noah's Flood

The Eastern love of the wonderful is manifest throughout Oriental literature, and nowhere more so than in the collection of stories known to us as the *Arabian Nights*. Anyone who has read these tales will remember the "huge bird called the 'Rukh' which feedeth its young on elephants." This bird, of enormous size and strength, makes its appearance in the *Second Voyage of Sindbad*, after Sindbad has discovered its egg, which looked like a huge white dome and measured fifty

paces round. To this bird Sindbad was indebted for his discovery of the "Valley of Diamonds."

Marco Polo, relating what he had heard from others, wrote that the bird was so big and so strong that it could bear away an elephant in its talons, lift it up to a great height, and then let it drop to the ground to be dashed to pieces. The rukh would then swoop down, tear the pieces with its beak, and feed on the carcass. "The span of its wings," he says, "reaches thirty paces, and the wing feathers are twelve paces long." The actual size varies in different manuscripts, but all indicate a gigantic bird.

It was to be found, according to Marco Polo's informants, in the Island Magaster [probably Madagascar], and in form resembled an eagle, although incomparably greater in size. The existence of such a bird was universally credited throughout the East, and is most probably an exaggeration rather than a purely imaginary fable. Modern research has confirmed the existence of very large birds, now extinct, in that part of the world, such as the giant *Aepyornis maximus* (page 127). A Frenchman, Etienne de Flacourt, writing about the middle of the seventeenth century,* states that gigantic ostriches were found on the island of Madagascar, and the size of these would undoubtedly be magnified in the telling. Arab traders, having seen the enormous eggs of the Aepyornis, would not doubt that a bird which could lay an egg equal in bulk to well over a hundred hen's eggs, would think nothing of carrying off a sheep, if not an ox.

**Histoire de Madagascar*, 1661.

REPTILES

The Jewelled Toad

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.
Shakespeare: As You Like It

Steevens, the famous Shakespearian critic of the eighteenth century, in a note upon this passage, reminds us that Thomas Lupton, in his first *Book of Notable Things* (1660), bears repeated testimony to the virtues of the toadstone called "crapaudina" (from the French name for a toad). In his seventh book he gives instructions on how it may be procured, and adds: "You shall knowe whether the tode-stone be the ryght and perfect stone or not. Holde the stone before a tode, so that he may see it; and, if it be a right and true stone, the tode will leape towarde it, and make as though he would snatch it. He envieth so much that man should have that stone."

The legend that ascribed virtues to the toadstone was one which for centuries was accepted not only in England, but throughout Europe. Albertus Magnus, writing about 1275, mentions it, and Porta, writing in the sixteenth century, though somewhat sceptical concerning the provenance of the stone, believed in its efficacy against poison. "There is a stone," he writes, "called Chelonites which they report to be found in the head of a great old Toad; and if it can be gotten from him while he is alive, it is soveraign against poyson. They say it is taken from living toads in a red cloth, in which colour they are much delighted; for while they sport themselves upon the scarlet the stone droppeth out of their head and falleth through a hole made in the middle into a box set under for the purpose, else they will suck it up again. But I never met with a faithfull person who said that he had

found it; nor could I ever find one, though I have cut up many. Nevertheless, I will affirm this for truth that those stones which are pretended to be taken out of Toads are minerals. But the value is certain: if any swallow it down with poyson it will preserve him from the malignity of it, for it runneth about with the poyson and asswageth the power of it that it becometh vain and of no force."

Lupton's "rare good way" of obtaining the toadstone was different. "It sufficeth," he says, "to put a great or overgrown toad, first bruised in divers places, into an earthen pot; put the same into an ant's hillocke, and cover the same with earth, which toad at length the ants will eat, so that the bones of the toad and stone will be left in the pot." This seems simple enough, but most of the writers of the period were unanimous in the opinion that, to possess any real virtue, the stone must be obtained from the living animal. Not that this was an easy matter, for Boethius confesses that he watched throughout the night an old toad which he had carefully placed upon a piece of scarlet cloth without anything happening to "gratify the great pangs of his whole night's restlessness."

Sir Thomas Browne was inclined to hedge. "As for the stone commonly called the toad-stone," he writes, "which is presumed to be found in the head of that animal, we first conceive it not a thing impossible." But, he goes on: "though it be not impossible, yet it is surely very rare; as we are induced to believe from some enquiry of our own, from the trial of many who have been deceived, and the frustrated search of Porta, who, upon the explorement of many, could scarce find one." This is not exactly what Porta said — he said definitely that he never found one.

Browne continues: "Nor is it only of rarity, but may be doubted whether it be of existency, or really any such stone in the head of a toad at all. For although lapidaries and questuary enquirers affirm it, yet the writers of minerals and natural speculators are of another belief; conceiving the

stones, which bear this name, to be a mineral concretion, not to be found in animals, but in fields."

Topsell tells us that "there be many that weare these stones in Ringes, beeing verily perswaded that they keepe them from all manner of grypings and paines of the belly and the small guttes. . . . This stone is that which in auncient time was called *Batrachites*, and they attribute unto it a vertue besides the former, namely, for the breaking of the stone in the bladder, and against the falling sicknes. And they further write that it is a discoverer of present poyson, for in the presence of poyson it will change the colour. And this is the substaunce of that which is written about this stone. Now for my part I dare not conclude either with it, or against it, for many are directlie for this stone ingendered in the braine or head of the Toade: on the other side, some confesse such a stone by name and nature, but they make doubt of the generation of it, as others have delivered; and therefore, they beeing in sundry opinions, the hearing whereof might confound the Reader, I will referre him for his satisfaction unto a Toade, which he may easily every day kill. For although when the Toade is dead, the vertue thereof be lost, which consisteth in the eye, or blew spot in the middle, yet the substance remaineth, and, if the stone be found there in substance, then is the question at an end; but if it be not, then must the generation of it be sought for in some other place."

Crocodile and Hippopotamus
[Topsell: *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes,* 1607]

The Tearful Crocodile

Crocodiles wept tears for thee.
Tennyson: A Dirge

The crocodile excited considerable interest among ancient writers. It is mentioned in the Book of Job. In Egypt, Sebek, the crocodile god, personified the destroying power of the sun, and was worshipped at Ombos and had a shrine in that temple. Sebek was also a deity of Thebes, and at Tanis, where that animal was more or less identified with Set, or Sutekh, Flinders Petrie found evidence of crocodile worship. At Crocodilopolis in the Fayum the priests kept tame crocodiles to which pilgrims brought offerings, and in caves near Maabdeh, opposite Manfalt, there have been discovered large numbers of mummified crocodiles. Pliny says that "this beast alone, of all other that keep the land, hath no use of a tongue," and it seems to have been the presumed absence of a tongue which caused it to be worshipped by the Egyptians as a creature embodying the eternal silence.

In Mandeville's *Travels* we read also of "many cocodrilles, that is a maner of a long serpent. . . . These serpents slay men and eate them weeping, and they have no tongue." Never-

theless the crocodile does have a tongue. As to the fable of its weeping, that, too, is very ancient. Spenser deals with this fancy in his *Faerie Queene,* saying:

> As when a werrie traveller, that strayes
> By muddy shore of broad seven-mouthed Nile,
> Unweeting of the perillous wandring wayes,
> Doth meete a cruell craftie Crocodile,
> Which in false grefe hyding his harmefull guile,
> Doth weep full sore, and sheddeth tender tears;
> The foolish man, that pities all this while
> His mournful plight, is swallowed up unawares,
> Forgetfull of his owne that mindes anothers cares.

Thus sham mourning has come to be expressed as shedding crocodile's tears, and Othello, in his despair at Desdemona's apparent unfaithfulness, exclaims:

> O devil, devil!
> If that the earth could teem with woman's tears,
> Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile.

Another Shakespearian allusion to the crocodile occurs in *King Henry VIII,* where Queen Margaret declares Henry to be

> Too full of foolish pity; and Gloster's show
> Beguiles him, as the mournful crocodile
> With sorrow snares relenting passengers.

Topsell, in his *Historie of Serpents,* has much to say about the crocodile, and quaintly describes his habits thus: "Some have written that the Crocodile runneth away from a man if he winke with his left eye, and looke steadfastly uppon him with his right eye, but if this bee true, it is not to be attributed to the vertue of the right eye, but onely to the rareness of sight which is conspicuous to the Serpent from one eye."

In another passage he writes: "The medicines arising out of it are also many. The first place belongeth to the Caule, which hath moe benefits or vertues in it than can be expressed. The bloud of a Crocodile is held profitable for many thinges, and among other, it is thought to cure the bitings of any Serpent. Also by anoynting the eyes, it cureth both the dregs, or spots of blood in them, and also restoreth soundnesse and clearnesse to the sight, taking away all dulnesse, or deadnesse from the eyes. And it is said that if a man take the liquor which commeth from a piece of the Crocodyle fryed, and annoynte therewithall his wound or harmed part, that then he shall bee presently rid of all paine and torment. The skinne both of the Land and Water Crocodile dryed into powder, and the same powder, with vineger or Oyle, layd upon a part or member of the body to be seared, cut off, or lanced, taketh away all sense and feeling of paine from the instrument in the action."

The "fat or sewett" of a crocodile, concocted with water and vinegar, is, according to Topsell, a cure for toothache and the bites of flies, spiders and worms, and likewise "it is thought to cure Wennes, bunches in the flesh and old woundes. It is sold deare, and held pretious in Alcair [Cairo]." No wonder, if it did all that Topsell claims for it!

A curious story concerning the crocodile is related by an early traveller in Angola, one Andrew Battell, who records this feat of greediness and its dire consequence. "One crocodile," he writes, "was so huge and greedy that he devoured an *alibamba,* that is, a chained company of eight or nine slaves; but the indigestible iron paid him his wage, and murthered the murtherer, found after in his belly."

The dramatist Webster, in his *Vittoria Corombona,* makes use of the story of the crocodile's feathered attendant (called by the ancients *trochilus*), which he most probably culled from the writings of the African traveller known as Leo Africanus, who seems to have been one of the first to record it:

"*Flamineo*: 'Stay, my Lord; I'll tell you a tale. The crocodile which lives in the River Nilus hath a worm breeds i' th' teeth of it, which puts it to extream anguish: a little bird, no bigger than a wren, is barber surgeon to the crocodile; flies into the jaws of it, picks out the worm, and brings present remedy. The fish, glad of ease, but ungrateful to her that did it, that the bird may not talk largely abroad of her foi non-payment, closeth her chaps, intending to swallow her, and so put her to perpetual silence. But nature, loathing such ingratitude, hath arm'd this bird with a quill or prick on the head top, which wound the crocodile i' th' mouth, forceth her to open her bloody prison, and away flies the pretty tooth-picker from her cruel patient.'"

Sir Thomas Herbert, in the 1677 edition of his *Travels*, records another curious belief: "The brumal quarter they fast from food, but the rest of the year devour all sorts of prey, and that with voracity. No less notable is the number of sixty in the female, for sixty days pass e're she lays her eggs, which are usually sixty in number; sixty days she conceals them, and when she sits spends sixty days in the hatching. She has sixty teeth and sixty joints and sixty years is usually the age of this detested Amphibium. . . . The most noxious of all sea-monsters it is, and rightly becomes the Dissemblers epithete, *In quibus est astuitia Hyaenae et pietas Crocodili.*"

In *Batman uppon Bartholomew*, published in 1582, we read that "of late years there hath been brought into England the cases or skinnes of such crocodiles to be seene, and much money given for the sight thereof; the policy of strangers laugh at our folly, either that we are too wealthy, or else that we know not how to bestow our money." This insatiable curiosity for seeing strange sights, so prevalent during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I, is thus satirized by Shakespeare in the *Tempest*:

"A strange fish! Were I in England now (as once I was), and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would

give a piece of silver; there would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man; when they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian."

Closely allied to the mongoose is the weasel-like animal frequently mentioned in ancient classical literature — the ichneumon. This animal was supposed to be a deadly enemy of the crocodile, and in Florio's translation of Montaigne we may read this description of how the smaller animal prepared himself for the combat: "When the ichneumon is to grapple with the crocodile, he walloweth his body in the mire, then lets the same drie and harden upon him, which he doth so often that at last the same becomes as hard and tough as any compact crust, which serveth in stead of a cuirace." This story seems to have originated in Oppian's *Cynegetica*.* The fable about the use of a mud cuirass was related by some writers in connection with other animals which were supposed to be enemies of the crocodile.

The ichneumon was often referred to as "Pharach's mouse" and Strabo wrote that it entered the crocodile's mouth when the latter was asleep and, being small, crept down its large throat, and then, "putting the crocodile to exquisite and intolerable torment by eating their guts asunder, and so their soft bellies, while the crocodile tumbleth to and fro, sighing and weeping." But, says Topsell, "whether it be true or no that the Trochilus doth awake the sleeping crocodile when he seeth the ichneumon lie in wait to enter into her I leave it to the credit of Strabo the reporter and to the discretion of the indifferent reader."

*A didactic poem on hunting written in the third century A.D.

Great Snakes

Frigidus, O pueri, fugite hinc, latet anguis in herba.
(Fly hence, O boys, for a cold snake lies hidden in the grass.)
Virgil: Eclogues

One legend that persisted for centuries held that snakes poisoned with their breath. In *Batman uppon Bartholomew* we read: "The serpent slaieth all that he biteth and is enemy to birds, for he slayeth them with his blowing." This idea is enlarged upon 150 years later by Father Jeronymo Lobo in his *Voyage to Abyssinia* (1735): "In crossing a desert in the kingdom of Tigre his life was in very great danger; for, whilst lying on the ground he perceived himself seized with a pain which forced him to rise; when he saw, about four yards from him, one of those serpents that dart their poison at a distance; and although he rose before the serpent approached him, he nevertheless felt the effects of his poisonous breath and had certainly died if he had lain a little longer." The victim cured himself with a bezoar, which he says he always carried about him as a sovereign remedy against these poisons. The bezoar was considered an unfailing remedy against poisons; it was a stony concretion obtained from the head of a red deer, reputed to have been formed from the tears of the animal after it had eaten a snake. This is a good example of that sympathetic magic in which great faith was at one time placed (on the principle of a hair of the dog that bit you). The bezoar enjoyed medical favour for several hundred years, until the famous surgeon Ambroise Paré showed that it was not a protection against poisons. Yet it remained a feature of the apothecary's *materia medica* until the eighteenth century.

Crates of Mallos (second century B.C.) tells how there once existed in a region adjoining the Hellespont a race of men called Ophiogenes, who by their touch were able to cure

those who had been stung by serpents. Other ancient writers speak of people whose saliva would cure the bite of poisonous snakes.

Topsell, in his *Historie of Serpents,* speaks of many of the legends woven about these reptiles by the ancients. Gellius, for instance, records "that when the Romanes were in the Carthaginian Warre, and Attilius Regulus the Consul had pitched his Tents neere unto the river Bragrada, there was a Serpent of monstrous quantitie, which had been lodged within the compasse of the Tents, and therefore did cause to the whole Armie exceeding great calamitie, untill by casting of stones with slings, and many other devices, they oppressed and slew that Serpent, and afterward fleyed off the skinne and sent it to Rome; which was in length one hundred and twentie feete."

But even Topsell's frequent credulity could not quite swallow all he read. "But if ever there were anything beyond credite," he writes, "it is the relation of Volateran in his twelfth booke of the *New-found Lands,* wherein he writeth that there are Serpents of a mile long, which at one certaine time of the yeere come abroad out of the holes and dennes of habitation, and destroy both the Heards and Heard-men if they find them."

Another very ancient tradition regarding serpents was that young vipers forced their way through the bowels of their dam, and that the female viper, in the act of generation, bites off the head of the male, in revenge for which the young ones eat through the womb and belly of the female. This was believed by a great number of the early naturalists, and Sir Thomas Browne says, "from hence is commonly assigned the reason why the Romans punished parricides by drowning them in a sack with a vipes."

It was said, too, that adders lay in wait for sleeping men, and Bartholomew Glanville says, "if they find the mouth open of them or of other beasts, then they creep in: for they love

heat and humour that they find here. But against such adders a little beast fighteth that hight Saura, as it were a little ewt, and some men mean that it is a lizard; for when this beast is aware that this serpent is present, then he leapeth upon his face that sleepeth, and scratcheth with his feet to wake him, and to warn him of the serpent."

There were, of course, as Topsell explains, many ways of driving snakes away. "To expell and drive farre away any venomous creatures, we use to make fumigations of the root of Lilies, Harts-horn, and the horns and hoofs of such beasts as be cloven footed: likewise of Bay leaves and berries, Calamint, Water-cresses, and the ashes of the Pine tree. The leaves of Vitex, Bitumen, Castoreum, Melanthium, Goats horns, Cardomum, Galbanum, Propolis, which may be called Bee-glew, the herb called Horstrange, Panax, Opopanax, Fleabane, the shavings or scrapings of the Cypress or Cedar tree being steeped in Oyl, the Jet-stone, Sagapinum, the herb called Poley, Fern, and all other things that have a strong or vehement ill savour, being cast on coals for a fumigation, do with their vapour chase away venomous beasts. For whereas all venomous creatures have the passages or pores of their bodyes very straight and narrow, they are very easily filled and stuffed, and are quickly stopped and suffocated by such like sents and smells."

Pliny says that if you burn the feathers of a vulture, all serpents will quickly avoid the strong scent. He also tells us that some people, for fear of serpents, "do anoint their bodies with the seeds of Juniper. The juyce of the black Vine, extracted from the root and anointed on the body performeth the like." Yet another talisman was to carry on the person wild Bugloss or the root of the wild carrot. Thus protected, "he cannot be wounded of any serpents." And Serenus writes:

> Wine mixt with Rennet taken from a Hart,
> So drunk, doth venom from the members part.

"He meaneth," says Topsell, "a young Hart being killed in the dams belly."

Topsell also writes that "there is such vertue in the Ash-tree that no Serpent will endure to come neer either the morning or evening shadow of it, yea though very far distant from them they do so deadly hate it. We set down nothing but that we have found true from experience."

Of all the symbols adopted by Christianity, the serpent is possibly the oldest. In the opening pages of Genesis the Devil assumes the shape of a reptile when he tempts Eve, and the Scriptures abound in references to the serpent. This emblem of deceit and perfidy came to Egypt by way of India and Persia. In Egypt serpent worship figured largely in the religious life of the people, and though there were good and evil serpents, it was more commonly looked upon as the personification of spiritual evil, and known as Apepi, or Apophis. Horus, the sun god, was often represented piercing Apophis with his lance in much the same manner as later the Christians showed St. George triumphing over the dragon.

Following the words of the author of the Apocalypse, the Church accepted the serpent as the symbol of the Devil, and Satan was variously called by the names *draco, anguis, serpens,* and *vermis,* all of which have the same reptilian connotation. The serpent became the symbol of Hell as the dove became that of the Holy Spirit. In Church processions and religious ceremonies during the Middle Ages a monstrous and frequently grotesque image of a serpent was borne in an inverted position, which signified its defeat, to show symbolically the conquest of the Devil by the Lord.

Salamander
[Cahier & Martin: *Nouveaux Mélanges d'Archéologie*]

The Icy Salamander

Falstaff: I have maintained that salamander of yours with fire any time this two-and-thirty years; God reward me for it!
Shakespeare: Henry IV, *Part* I

The salamander provides a good example of the legend which grows by a gradual accretion of fancies. Aristotle said no more than that the salamander, by walking through a fire, put it out. Even this he qualifies with a careful "they say." It was not until later that the idea that it lived in the midst of a fire took root. Pliny says: "The salamander, an animal like a lizard in shape, and with a body starred all over, never comes out except during heavy showers, and disappears the moment it becomes fine. This animal is so intensely cold as to extinguish

fire by its contact, in the same way that ice doth. It spits forth a milky matter from its mouth; and whatever part of the human body is touched with this, all the hairs fall off, and the part assumes the appearance of leprosy."

Sir Thomas Herbert, in his *Travels,* seems to have relied more on what the ancients said than on his own observations, for talking of Madagascar he says: "Salamanders here be also, a sort of lizard extreme cold by nature, whence (like ice) for some time they endure the fire, yea (if little) extinguish it, as Aristotle affirms."

In the literature of the Tudor age we find the legend taken a stage further with the idea that the salamander is nourished by the fire, though how this could happen when its very contact was sufficient to extinguish the flames is not easily comprehended. The badge of François I was a lizard in the midst of flames with the motto: *Nutrisco et extinguo.* "One would have thought," writes F. E. Hulme, "that the crucial test of actual experiment would have settled the whole matter, and reduced the fire-extinguishing theory to oblivion, but it takes much more than that to kill an old and well-established belief."

When asbestos was first discovered it was thought to be the wool of the salamander, and in a work printed by Caxton in 1481 we read that "this Salemandre berith wulle, of which is made cloth and gyrdles that may not brenne in the fyre." In the *Chronicle of Albericus* a letter from the mysterious ruler known as Prester John is quoted, giving details of the wonders to be found in his kingdom. "In one of our lands, hight Zone, are worms called in our tongue salamanders. These worms can only live in fire, and they build cocoons like silkworms, which are unwound by the ladies of our palace and spun into cloth and dresses, which are worn by our Exaltedness. These dresses, when we would wash them and clean, are cast into flames." Sir Thomas Browne would have none of this, and remarks that the salamander is "a kind of

lizard, a quadruped corticated and depilous, that is, without wool, fur, or hair . . . nor is this salamander's wool desumed [taken from] from any animal, but a mineral substance, metaphorically so called from this received opinion."

It was thought, too, that the salamander was a poisonous creature, and that if it climbed a fruit tree, all the fruit would become infected with the venom. In like manner, if it fell into a well the water therein would become poisonous. Bartholomew Glanville accepts without questioning the statement that 4000 men and 2000 horses of the army of Alexander the Great were killed by injudiciously drinking from a stream into which salamanders had fallen.

DuBartas, in his *Divine Weekes & Works,* writes:

> God, not contented to each kind to give
> And to infuse the virtue generative,
> Made by His wisdom many creatures breed
> Of lifeless bodies, growing without seed.
> So the cold humour breeds the salamander,
> Who, in effect, like to her birth's commander,
> Pregnant with hundred winters, with her touch
> Quencheth the fire, though glowing ne'er so much.

Here be Dragons

> Behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.
>
> *Revelations of St. John*

Aldrovandi published in 1640 a *History of Serpents and Dragons*, in which no fewer than forty-eight pages of a folio volume are devoted to the dragon. Now the fact that Aldrovandi did not write about the dragon in another of his books, called *History of Monsters*, seems to indicate that to him, at any rate, dragons were very real, as indeed they were to most people of his time.

The dragon figures in the history and mythology of almost every race in the world, and has been endowed with both beneficent and malevolent attributes. To trace its history one would have to delve into the myths, religions and literature of all countries. But whereas in the East the dragon represents the powers of nature, particularly in its association with the watery elements, and, though at times capricious, is on the whole a beneficent monster, the Western dragon is the exemplification of evil, as in the legend of St. George. Yet for all its wickedness the dragon was looked upon as a symbol of strength and power.

Since power and the ability to inspire terror were among the characteristics of the Western dragon, it is not surprising to find it adopted early as a warlike emblem, so that the old Vikings painted dragons on their shields and carried dragon heads on the prows of their ships. And in England, in the days before the Norman conquest, the dragon was paramount among the royal emblems in time of war. Pendragon was a title conferred on some of the British chiefs when they were invested with special powers in time of great danger. In the Arthurian legends Uther, the father of King Arthur, bore on his royal standard a golden dragon, from which he received the title of Uther Pendragon.

The first to introduce dragons into the literature of Western Europe were the poets of Greece and Rome. Homer, in his description of the shield of Heracles, speaks of "the scaly horror of a dragon coiled full in the central field, unspeakable, with eyes oblique, retorted, that askant shot gleaming fire." Hesiod, describing the same object, says: "In the centre was the dreadful terror of a dragon glancing backward, its eyes gleaming with fire. Its mouth was filled with teeth running in a white line, dreadful and unapproachable. . . .on it likewise were heads of terrible serpents, unspeakable, twelve in number."

It is perhaps worth noting that Hesiod here distinguishes between dragon and serpents, for the Greek word *drakon* meant a snake and usually referred to large species such as the python. When Pliny states that the dragon, to combat the sickness which affects it in the spring, seeks the juices of the lettuce, he is almost certainly talking about a large snake. In Book 29 of his *Natural History* he writes: "The dragon is a serpent destitute of venom. Its head if placed at the threshold of the house, the gods being duly propitiated by prayer, will ensure good fortune, it is said, to all who dwell therein."

G. Elliot Smith writes in *The Evolution of the Dragon* that "the real dragon was created when all three larval types – serpent, eagle-lion, and antelope-fish – were blended to form a monster with bird's feet and wings, a lion's forelimbs and head, the fish's scales, the antelope's horns, and a more or less serpentine form of trunk and tail, and sometimes also of head. Repeated substitution of parts of other animals, such as the spiral horn of Amen's ram, a deer's antlers, and the elephant's head, led to endless variations in the dragon's traits."

Pliny was surely describing the python when he wrote: "In Aethyopia there be as great dragons bred as in India namely twenty cubits long: but I marvell much at this one thing, that king Juba should think they are crested. They are

bred most in a countrey of Aethyopia where the Asachaei inhabit. It is reported that upon their coast they are inwrapped foure or five of them one within another, like to a hurdle or lattise-worke, and thus passe the seas to find out better pasturage in Arabia, cutting the waves and bearing their heads aloft, which serve them instead of sailes."

The legend of the Ethiopian dragon had received various additions by the time we meet it in the *Hortus Sanitatis* (Book 2, Chapter 48). "From the brains of dragons," we read, "is hatched the stone Dracontias; but the stone is only to be taken from the living animal, for if it die first, the hardness of the stone disappears with the breath. Dragons are put to sleep with medicated grasses, and thus the stone is procured. The heads of dragons make a house prosperous and fortunate. Dragon's flesh is the colour of glass, and it cools those who eat it. Therefore the Ethiopians who dwell on that burning coast gladly eat of the flesh of dragons, so that their factors tame the Dragon with certain songs and, sitting on his back, guide him with a bridle until they come to Ethiopia."

All Homer's dragons were undoubtedly serpents, and a dragon was one of the shapes into which Proteus turned himself. Serpent, also, was the dragon mentioned by Cicero in *De Natura Deorum;* serpents were the dragons of Diodorus Siculus that fought with and vanquished elephants; serpents were the dragons of Aelian that fell in love with youths; serpents, likewise, were the dragons of Lucretius that lent their tail to the Chimera; serpents were the dragons of Horace and Virgil. In fact the reptile which attacked Laocoon is called by Virgil a snake in one passage and a dragon in another. When we come to the folklore of the Middle Ages the dragon is often termed a mighty worm (compare the German *Wurm,* a reptile). In fact the town of Worms in Germany owes its name to the "*Lind-wurm*" or dragon slain there by Siegfried, as related in the *Niebelungenlied.* Drachenfels, on the Rhine, got its name from that same monster.

The dragon became a more composite creature as time went by, and from the great snake of the ancients gradually developed the wondrous monster compounded of various elements as described by Elliot Smith, who also says that "all dragons that strictly conform to the conventional idea of what such a beast should be, can be shown to be sprung from the fertile imagination of ancient Sumer, the 'great breeding place of monsters.'"

Since medieval theology made the dragon the symbol of the Devil, it followed that many saints were, in Christian legend, the slayers of dragons. The best-known of these is, of course, St. George, but others include St. Philip the Apostle, who slew a huge dragon at Hierapolis in Phrygia by holding up a cross; St. Michael, who in Callot's *Images* is represented winged, trampling on the dragon, and piercing him with a spear; St. Keyne of Cornwall; St. Clement of Metz; St. Florent, who slew the dreaded dragon which haunted the Loire; St. Cado, St. Maudet, and St. Paul, who performed similar feats in Brittany. Sometimes the dragons had local names. In Provence St. Marthe slew the dragon named the *Tarasque,* which gave its name to Tarascon, by sprinkling the monster with holy water and holding before it a crucifix, after which the beast became as docile as a lamb and was led away by the saint and delivered to the people who stoned it to death. *Gargouille* was a great dragon which lived in a cave by the Seine and periodically ravaged Rouen until it was slain by St. Romanus, Bishop of Rouen in the seventh century.

Topsell, that great collector of other people's natural (or unnatural) history, has a great deal to say about the dragon. "There be some Dragons," he tells us, "which have wings and no feet, some again have both feet and wings, and some neither feet nor wings, but are only distinguished from the common sort of serpents by the combe growing upon their heads and the beard under their cheeks." Of the winged

dragon he says: "Gillius, Pierius and Grevinus do affirm that a Dragon is of a black colour, the belly somewhat green, and very beautiful to behold, having a treble row of teeth in their mouths upon every jaw [this sounds very much like a description of the manticora, page 90] and with most bright and cleer seeing eyes. . . . They have also two dewlaps growing under their chin and hanging downe like a beard, which are of a red colour; their bodies are set all over with very sharp scales, and over their eyes stand certain flexible eyelids."

Aelian tells of how the dragon, when it intended to harm a man, ate poisonous herbs beforehand, and even should the man succeed in wounding his opponent, one drop of the dragon's blood would kill him. This theme is taken up by Topsell, who relates that "when the region of Helvetia began first to be purged from noysome beasts there was a horrible dragon found neere a countrey town called Wilser who did destroy all men and beastes." A man of the town called Winckelriedt, who had been banished for manslaughter, was offered a pardon and the restoration of his goods if he would fight the dragon. He was successful in killing it, "whereat for joy he lifted up his sword imbrued in the Dragon's bloud, in token of victory, but the bloud distilled down from his sword upon his body, and caused him instantly to fall down dead."

The venomous breath of the dragon was stressed by early writers. "The Dragons of Phrygia," writes Topsell, "when they are hungry turn themselves towards the West and gaping wide, with the force of their breath do draw the Birds that flie over their heads into their throats, which some have thought is but a voluntary lapse of the Fowles, to be drawn by the breath of the Dragon, as by a thing they love, but it is more probable that some vaporous and venomous breath is sent up from the Dragon to them, that poysoneth and infecteth the aire about them, whereby their senses are taken from them, and they astonished fall down into his mouth."

Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses* (Book 3, 35), speaks of the dragon slain by Cadmus, son of Agenor, king of Tyre, as being

hidden in a cavern, adorned with crests and of a golden colour; and he also tells of its venomous breath. You may remember that in the Greek myth, Cadmus, by Athene's order, sowed the dragon's teeth, and from them sprung armed men who began to fight among themselves until only five were left. These became the ancestors of the noble families of Thebes.

Among the dragon legends of Britain one of the best known is that which tells of the "laidley Worme" of Lambton, which was slain in a rather unsporting manner by the young heir of Lambton. In his youth the heir used to spend his Sundays fishing in the river Wear. One day he hooked a worm, which he threw away without further thought. The worm grew and grew until it was the size of a monstrous serpent, and when it basked, as was its habit, on a grassy mound by the banks of the Wear it coiled itself nine times round. Before long it was the terror of the countryside, exacting from the inhabitants of the farms nearby a daily tribute of the milk of nine cows, which was placed for it on the green hillock. In default of this it devoured man and beast.

Meanwhile, the heir of Lambton, repenting of his ill-spent youth, had joined the Crusaders and departed overseas. When he eventually returned home, he was shocked at what had happened owing to his former profanation of the Sabbath day, and he at once volunteered to slay the dreaded worm. But in each combat with the worm he was foiled, because each time that he cut the worm in two the pieces at once reunited. He therefore took counsel with a witch, who advised him to make use of a coat of mail studded with razor-edged blades. Thus prepared, he placed himself upon a rock in the river and awaited the onslaught of the "laidley Worme," which, when it reached the rock, wound itself in fury nine times around the knight's armour. As a result it was cut to pieces by its own fierce efforts, and as the severed parts were washed away by the swift flowing river, all possibility of a serpentine reunion was ended.

Stories of knights slaying dragons were standard fare in the

Middle Ages, and as Broderip neatly puts it, "there was a time when nobody was anybody who had not slain his dragon." They were all King Pellinores in search of the Questing Beast.

Dragons were frequently killed by some cunning ruse with which their limited intelligence could not cope. In the time of King Cracus of Poland there was a dragon which lived in a rocky cave, after the manner of dragons, and when hungry emerged to devour man and beast alike. In an attempt to pacify this monster three oxen were daily brought to the mouth of the cave to satisfy his hunger, but even this did not satisfy the ravenous beast. The king, filled with pity for his people, hit upon the following ruse. A calf's skin was filled with pitch, sulphur and nitre, and thrown into the cave. The dragon ate greedily, gave one terrifying bellow, and expired on the spot.
on the spot.

Another delightful tale of a contest between man and dragon is related by Athanasius (not Ananias) Kircher, in his *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665). This combat took place on the island of Rhodes in the year 1349. The knight's name was Gozione and the dragon was a monster as big as an ox, with long neck and serpent's head, tipped with mule's ears, a mouth filled with sharp teeth, eyes that flashed fire, four feet ending in bear's claws, a tail like a crocodile's, and a body encased in hard scales. It had two wings, blue on top, but scarlet and yellow beneath. It had the speed of the swiftest horse, partly flying and partly running.

Unlike some other knights, Gozione spent a considerable time working out his plan of campaign. He constructed a dragon in facsimile and got slaves to make its jaws snap and its tail twist by means of a system of cords. He attacked this mock-up of a dragon on horseback, accompanied by two fierce dogs, which, after a couple of months, could not restrain their rage at the sight of the queer creature. The knight then went to Rhodes and, after praying in the Church of St. Stephen set out for the cave where the real monster dwelt. At the first encounter the knight's spear was shattered, but

leaping from his horse he fought on foot with sword and shield, aided presumably by the distracting influence of the savage dogs, until he finally cut off the dragon's head. Schiller wrote a long ballad on the subject called *Der Kampf mit dem Drachen.*

Kircher has another dragon story which tells of a man from Lucerne who fell into a cavern and could not make his escape because the hole through which he had fallen was too far above him. In searching for another exit, though in vain, he came across two dragons which, unlike their kind, made no attempt to molest him. In this cave he remained unharmed for six months of winter, surviving by licking the moisture off the walls of the cave. With the approach of spring the dragons prepared to fly out, and realizing that this was his only chance of deliverance from his prison, the man tied himself by his girdle to the tail of one of them and was in this manner carried back to the upper world. There, unfortunately, a too sudden return to a normal diet proved too much for him and he expired. In memory of the event, a monument illustrative of his escape was set up in the Ecclesiastical College of St. Leodegaris at Lucerne. Kircher saw it, so of course the tale must be true.

Indeed, Kircher was very angry with those who scoffed at dragons, in whose existence he believed implicitly, for, he declares, "no one can or should doubt, unless perchance he dares contradict the Holy Scripture, for it would be impious to say as much when Daniel mentions the worship accorded to the dragon Bel by the Babylonians, and after the mention of the dragon in other parts of the Scriptures."

Among the encyclopaedic compilers of the Renaissance, Ulisse Aldrovandi seems, from his *Serpentum et Draconum Historiae,* to have believed in the existence of dragons, for his book contains two woodcuts, one of which he is said to have received in 1551 — a true Ethiopian dragon, which he describes as having two feet armed with claws, two ears, and

five small protuberances conspicuous upon its back. It had wings, a long and flexible tail, and scales all over its body, which ranged in colour from yellow on the tail to light and dark green on the body. He rebukes Ammianus Marcellinus for his disbelief in winged dragons and declares that he himself has heard (from unimpeachable sources, of course) that in a region of Pistoria called Cotone was seen a great dragon with wings of enormous width, which was as big as a bear, and also had two short feet ending in eagle's talons.

His contemporary, the Frenchman Pierre Belon, published in 1557 his *Portraits de quelques animaux*, in which there is a woodcut (borrowed later by Gesner) of a winged dragon with two feet. This is called "Portrait of the Winged Serpent" and has underneath it the following quatrain:

> Dangereuse est du Serpent la nature,
> Qu'on voit voler pres le mont Sinai.
> Qui ne seroit, de le voir, esbahy,
> Si on a peur, voyant sa pourtraiture.

Gesner not only copied this likeness of the dragon but added three other cuts of formidable dragons. He also repeats the story of its flying out of Arabia into Egypt.

Although on the whole dragons were reputed to be evil and savage monsters, Topsell relates tales, culled from various sources, of dragons which fell in love with humans. These stories were greatly to this reverend gentleman's liking, for they enabled him to reach the moral conclusion that "these savage creatures are made loving and tame to men by good turnes and benefits bestowed upon them, for there is no nature which may not be overcome by kindenesse."

Ancient writers attributed great medicinal virtue to certain preparations derived from the dragon's carcass, and of these Topsell gives several examples. For instance: "The fat of a dragon, dryed in the sunne, is good against creeping ulcers; and the same mingled with Honey and Oyl helpeth the dimnesse of the eyes. The eyes being kept till they be stale,

and afterwards beat into an Oyl with Honey and made into ointment keep any one that uses it from the terrour of night visions and apparitions. . . . But of all other, there is no folly comparable to the composition which the Magitians draw out of a Dragon to make one invincible, and that is this: they take the head and tail of a Dragon with the hairs out of the forehead of a lyon and the marrow of a lyon; the spume or white mouth of a conquering horse, bound up in a Harts skin, together with the claw of a dog, and fastened with the crosse nerves or sinew of a hart or of a roe; they say that this hath as much power to make one invincible as hath any medicine or remedy whatsoever."

In former days, during the festival of the Rogations, which preceded Ascension Day, the clergy walked in procession around the boundaries of their parish, stopping at certain prescribed spots to offer up prayers. During the Middle Ages, the image of a dragon was usually carried around, symbolizing the spirit of evil, and on the last of the three days of the festival the dragon was stoned and kicked by the populace. This processional dragon was still met with in the nineteenth century, and a writer in Hone's *Book of Days* recalls how, until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, the famous Norwich dragon called Snap annually went in procession with the mayor and corporation on the Tuesday preceding the eve of St. John the Baptist:

"Guarded by four *whifflers,* armed with drawn swords, Snap seemed to be quite at home among the bands and banners of the procession. But, true to his ancient traditionary instincts, though on that important anniversary the cathedral was strewn with rushes to receive the civic dignitaries in the olden manner, Snap never presumed to enter the sacred edifice, but sat upon a stone — the dragon's stone — till the service was concluded, and the procession resumed its onward march."

The dragon, of course, plays an important part in heraldry, and during the Middle Ages there was not a great deal of

difference between the dragon and the wyvern (page 196) as shown in coats of arms. The dragon became popular with the coming of the Tudors, who bore it as their badge. Out of respect for his Welsh ancestry, Henry of Richmond sported the device of the Red Dragon when he encountered the army of Richard III at Bosworth. After he was duly crowned king as Henry VII, he made the dragon one of the supporters of the arms of England, and so it remained until the accession of James I, when it was replaced by the Scottish unicorn.

On St. David's Day patriotic Welshmen fly *Y Ddraig Goch*, the Red Dragon with extended wings, now usually placed on two horizontal and equal bars of white and green. At the Union of Great Britain and Ireland a Red Dragon on a green mount was made the official badge of Wales, and in 1911 King George V decreed that Prince Edward (now the Duke of Windsor) and his successors as princes of Wales, should incorporate this device upon their princely shield. In 1953 Queen Elizabeth II ordered that henceforward the badge of Wales should be the Red Dragon charged on a shield half white and half green, together with the motto *Y Ddraig Goch Ddyry Chchwyn*, meaning "The Red Dragon gives the lead."

The figures of heraldic dragons vary, but the chief characteristics are the head of a wolf, body of a serpent, eagle's talons, extended bat-like wings and a barbed tongue and tail. One of the pursuivants in the College of Arms is still known as "Rouge Dragon" in commemoration of the victory at Bosworth.

In the literature of our own land, no less than in that of other countries, the dragon makes a brave showing. One of the oldest ballads on the subject is *Sir Bevis of Hampton* (a prototype of St. George and the Dragon). This dragon was a fearful monster —

> He turned his body towarde the sun;
> It was greater than any tonne;
> His scales were brighter than the glas,

And harder they were than any bras;
Betweene his shoulder and his tayle
Was forty fote without fayle.

Long and terrible was the battle between man and beast, but fortunately Sir Bevis stumbled into a well which had the miraculous power of healing him of his wounds, so that he came out of it

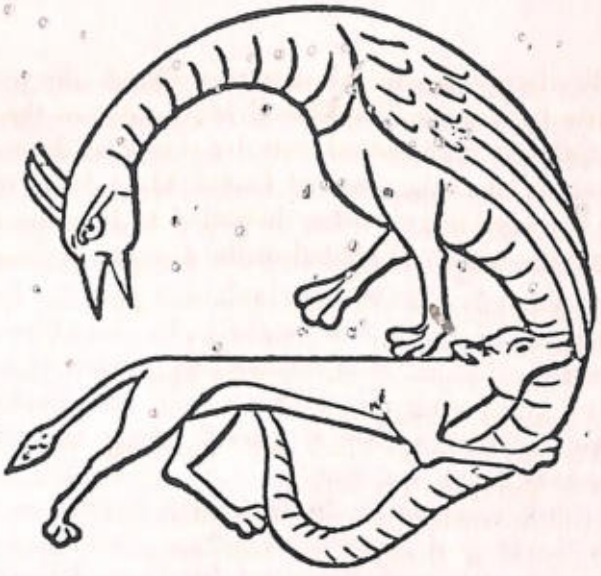
as hole as any man,
Ever fresh as when he began:
The dragon saw it might not availe
Beside the well to hold batayle;
He thought he would with some wyle,
Out of that place Bevis begyle;
He would have flown then away,
But Bevis lept after with good Morglaye,
And hit him under the winge,
As he was in his flyenge,
There he was tender without scale,
And Bevis thought to be his bale.
He smote after as I you saye,
With his good sword Morglaye.
Up to the hiltes Morglaye yode
Through harte, liver, bone, and bloude;
To the ground fell the dragon,
Great joye Syr Bevis begon.
Under the scales all on hight
He smote off his head forth right.

Sir Guy of Warwick was another hero of romance, who not only slew the savage beast known as the Dun Cow, but also killed a few dragons in his time, including the famous dragon of Northumberland,

Which did both man and beaste oppresse
And all the country sore annoye.

But as Broderip remarks, "dragons were gradually put out of countenance by ridicule," and the flying dragon of the natural historian today is represented only by the small insect-eating creature which bears the name of *Draco*. The tales of terror inspired by the mythical monster dwindled to humorous satires such as that upon the old legend of the Dragon of Wantley:

> The Dragon of Wantley churches ate
> (He used to come of a'Sunday).
> Whole congregations were to him
> A dish of Salmagundi.
> Parsons were his black puddings, and
> Fat aldermen his capons,
> And his tit-bit the collection plate
> Brimful of Birmingham halfpence.
> The corporation worshipful
> He valued not an ace;
> But swallowed the mayor, asleep in his chair,
> And picked his teeth with the mace.



Basilisk
[Cahier & Martin: *Nouveaux Mélanges d'Archéologie*]

The Baleful Basilisk

What shield of Ajax could avoid their death
By the Basilisk whose pestilential breath
Doth pearce firm Marble, and whose banefull eye
Wounds with a glance, so that the wounded dye.
Du Bartas: Divine Weekes & Works

English literature is full of references to the basilisk. It is mentioned in the *Parson's Tale* of Chaucer, Spenser's *Fairie Queene,* Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Cymbeline,* Massinger's *The Unnatural Combat,* Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster,* and the *Volpone* of Ben Jonson, to mention a few instances.

Not until the thirteenth century did the basilisk become a

horrid monster; at first it was merely a snake, which, though highly venomous, was nevertheless of normal reptilian form. Pliny forcefully describes him: "With his hies he driveth away other serpents; he moveth his body forward not only by multiplied windings like other serpents, but he goeth with half his body upright and aloft from the ground; he killeth all shrubs not only that he toucheth, but that he breatheth upon; he burns up herbs and breaketh the stones, so great is his power for mischief. It is received of a truth that one of them being killed with a lance by a man on horseback, the poison was so strong that it passed along the staff and destroyed both horse and man."

The basilisk was known to the early writers on natural history as the king of serpents, and thus got its name, from the Greek diminutive of the word for king. For the same reason, we find it depicted in early works of zoology as wearing a crown on its head. But the supposed appearance of the basilisk changed during the centuries and by the Middle Ages it had gathered around itself an accretion of fabulous lore. For instance, it was said to be born from an egg laid by a seven-year-old cock when the dog star Sirius was in the ascendant. Such an egg was not ovoid in shape but spherical. It had no shell, but was enclosed in a tough membrane. Furthermore, this egg had to be hatched by a toad! One of the first to propagate this story in English seems to have been Alexander Neckham. In the fourteenth century the basilisk began to receive the alternative name of "cockatrice," and the latter term appears in Wyclif's Bible as the translation of *basilicus* and *regulus* in the Vulgate. This alternative name appears in 1387 in Trevisa's translation of Bartholomew Glanville; in this case, largely a restatement of Neckham. In Bartholomew we find this passage: "The cockatrice hight Basilicus in Greek and Regulus in Latin; and hath that name Regulus of a little king, for he is the king of serpents, and they be afraid and flee when they see him. For he slayeth

them with his smell and with his breath; and slayeth also anything that hath life with breath and with sight. In his sight no fowl nor bird passeth harmless, and though he be far from the fowl, yet it is burned and devoured by his mouth. But he is overcome by the weasel; and men bring the weasel to the cockatrice's den, where he lurketh and is hid."

By the time of the Elizabethans the terms basilisk and cockatrice were used interchangeably by writers according to the needs of euphony. Shakespeare and Spenser use both forms.

In 1792 an Italian, Luigi Bossi, published a book called *Dei Basilischi, Dragoni, ed altri animali crèduti favolosi,** in which he sought to discredit some of the old wives' tales concerning the basilisk. He writes:

"Even more absurd is the story of how the basilisk is engendered from the egg of an old cock and hatched out after nine years by a horrible toad. They say that this egg has no shell but only a skin, or hard membrane. They say that the cock produces this egg when it is no longer capable of coition and retains all its sperm, which coagulates and hardens into an egg-like mass. They say that this egg has to be laid in plenty of warm dung. They say . . . in short they repeat a thousand idiocies."

Strangely enough Sir Thomas Browne, the most sceptical of men, allowed the existence of the basilisk, although he decried the nonsense of its generation from a cock's egg. But he thought there was "no high improbability" in the story that it could kill with a look. "For," he says, "if plagues or pestilential atoms have been conveyed in the air from different regions — if men at a distance have infected each other — if the shadows of some trees be noxious† — we cannot reasonably deny that there may proceed from subtiler seeds, more agile emanations,

**Of Basilisks, Dragons, and other imaginary-fabulous beasts.*

†An illusion to the old belief that the shadow of the upas tree was poisonous.

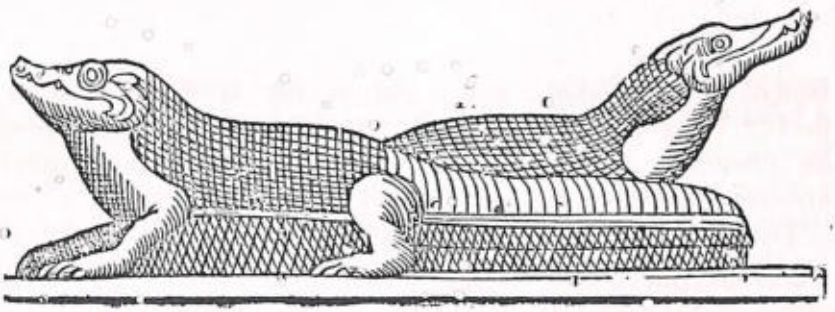
which contemn those laws, and invade at distance unexpected." But Jean Bodin neatly summed up the situation in his *Theatrum Naturae* (1596) by remarking: "If the basilisk kills merely by being seen, then who has ever seen it?"

The fact that basilisk and cockatrice were often used as alternative names for the same creature leads Shakespeare to write, in *Richard III*:

> A cockatrice hast thou hatch'd to the world,
> Whose unavoided eye is murderous.

Professor Skeat thought the term cockatrice came originally from the Greek *krokodeilos* (Low Latin *cocodrillus*) and in the thirteenth century the word cocatrix was occasionally used for crocodile. The French at that time called crocodiles *caucatrices* and since French was the language of the English Court at that period the word became anglicized as cockatrice, but applied to a different creature.

The basilisk is frequently used as a heraldic emblem, in which case it allies to the dragon-like form of the wyvern: a crested head, barbed tongue, and snake-like tail. The basilisk of the modern naturalist is quite harmless, though certainly one variety, *Basiliscus mitratus,* looks uncommonly fierce.



Amphisbaena
[Aldrovandi: *Historia Monstrorum*, 1642]

The Two-Headed Amphisbaena

> The dangerous amphisbaena, which turns according to its double head.
>
> *Lucan: Pharsalia*

The amphisbaena, as its name implies, is a serpent that can move both forwards and backwards. In manuscript bestiaries and early church sculpture the amphisbaena is usually depicted as a dragon with a second head upon its tail. Such representations are found in churches built between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries — sometimes as a symbolic device on fonts, or often as carvings on misericords. G.C. Druce describes several, including a beautiful example upon one of the bosses of the old nave roof of Southwark Cathedral, originally set up by Henry de Burton, Prior in 1469, the year in which the stone roof fell in due to the removal of some of the external buttresses. The bosses were preserved, and "this example," writes Druce, "shows the pure dragon type. It has large wings and the tail head is practically a replica of the other."

Aelian, in *The Nature of Animals*, writes: "The Amphisbaena is a serpent which has two heads, one on the fore part, one on the back. When it has to move in a certain direction it

puts one head in the place of the tail and uses the other for a head; if it wants to go back it uses the heads in the opposite way."

Pliny, of course, mentions this creature. "The Amphisbaena has two heads – that is to say it has a second one at the tail, as though one mouth were too little to discharge all its venom." He adds the following piece of information: "A remedy for cold shiverings, according to Nicander,* is a dead Amphisbaena, or its skin only, attached to the body." He further informs us that if an amphisbaena is nailed to a tree about to be felled, the woodsman will never feel cold, and will fell the tree all the more easily.

A manuscript English bestiary in Latin of the thirteenth century, now in the British Museum (Harleian MSS. 4751) has an illustration showing an amphisbaena in a circular panel, with a head upon its tail. The accompanying text reads: "The Amphisbaena is thus named in that it has two heads, one in the usual place and the other on the tail, running with either head first and its body bent round. This is the only one of the serpents which exposes itself to the cold, showing itself before any of the others."

When we come to the period of the Renaissance, we find that Aldrovandi, in his *History of Serpents and Dragons*, devotes several pages to this creature. In his description he writes: "The Amphisbaena and the scytala are very much alike, of equal thickness, so that it is difficult to distinguish head from tail, but they differ in that the Amphisbaena can go according to the will of either end, since it is well provided by nature with two heads." As was usual at that time, Aldrovandi appends a *Moralia* to his treatise, in which he compares men of two minds with this serpent, "for," he says, "just as this abnormal snake, having a head at each end uses either end of its body for a tail, so the aforesaid men will

*Nicander of Colophon, a Greek of the second century B.C., wrote works on the bites of venomous animals, and antidotes to their poison.

follow the course most convenient to themselves, sometimes for this reason, sometimes for that."

Sir Thomas Browne craved leave to doubt of this double-headed serpent until, as he said, "we have the advantage to behold, or have an iterated ocular testimony concerning such as are sometimes mentioned by American relators, and also such as Cassianus Puteus showed in a picture to Joannes Faber, and that which is set down under the name of *amphisbaena europaea* in his learned discourse upon Hernandez's *History of America*."

The name amphisbaena is today given by zoologists to a kind of legless tropical lizard, which can progress with either end foremost.

The Wyvern

Known chiefly as a heraldic animal, the wyvern was a flying serpent, an imaginary creature resembling the dragon but having only two legs, which were like an eagle's, and a barbed serpent-like tail. A dragon, or wyvern without wings, is termed a lindworm.

SEA BEASTS

The Remora or Sucking Fish

To swim up to her, and like remoras
Hang upon her keel, to stay her flight.
Massinger: The Renegado

A curious fancy which lasted for many centuries was the belief that the remora, or sucking fish, could arrest the progress of a ship under full sail by attaching its tail to a rock and seizing with its mouth the keel of a passing ship. In his *Visions of the World's Vanity,* Spenser writes:

Looking far forth into the ocean wide,
A goodly ship, with banners bravely dight,
And flag in her top-gallant I espied,
Through the main sea making her merry flight:
Fair blew the wind into her bosom right,
And th' Heavens looked lovely all the while
That she did seem to dance, as in delight,
And at her own felicity did smile:
All suddenly there clove unto her keel
A little fish that we call remora,
Which stopt her course, and held her by the heel,
That wind nor tide could move her thence away.
Strange thing meseemeth that so small a thing
Should able be so great an one to wring.

Strange indeed! One old writer, despairing of any satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon, contents himself with saying that "there can be no more reason given than of the loadstone drawing iron; neither is it possible to show the cause of all secrets in Nature."

Remora is the Latin name for the fish which the Greeks called *echeneis* (stay-ship), and Pliny writes of it: "It is thought that if it settle and stick to the keele of a ship under water, it goweth the slower by that means; whereupon it was

so called. And for that cause also it hath but a bad name in matters of love, for inchanting as it were both men and women, and bereaving them of their heat and affection that way. . . . Trebius Niger saith it is a foot long, and five fingers thicke, and that oftentimes it stayeth a ship. And moreover, as he saith, it hath this vertue being kept in salt, to draw up gold that is fallen into a pit or well, being never so deep, if it be let downe and come to touch it" Truly a versatile fish.

Such was the power of suction of "the lazy remora's inhaling lips," in popular fancy at least, that one of these creatures was supposed to have held back Antony's flagship in the sea-fight off Actium. A similar incident is reported by Pliny to have happened to the royal ship of the emperor Caius Caligula, who was understandably indignant "that so small a thing as this should hold her back perforce, and check the strength of all his warriors notwithstanding there were no fewer than 400 lustie men in his galley that laboured at the ore, all that ever they could do to the contrary."

In the fourth book of *Pantagruel* the sceptical Dr. François Rabelais pokes fun at the story. Why should it be difficult for Master Gaster to cause bullets to fly backwards, he asks, and recoil on those that sent them "seeing the herb *Ethiopis* opens all locks whatsoever, and an *Echineis* or *Remora,* a silly weakly fish, in spite of all the winds that blow from the 32 points of the Compass, will in the midst of a hurricane make you the biggest first-rate remain stock still as if she were becalmed."

Great Norwegian Sea Serpent
[Olaus Magnus: *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, 1567]

The Perennial Sea Serpent

On the dark bottom of the great salt lake
Imprisoned lay the giant snake,
With naught his sullen sleep to break.

Oelenschlager, trans. Longfellow

He is perennially with us. Despite all that we know about natural history today, the sea serpent still finds us guessing, and the Loch Ness monster still exercises an undiminished fascination for those of us who like to think that the world still holds some mysteries. The earliest known account seems to be that given in Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*, in which he speaks of great sea serpents off the coast of Libya. Mariners sailing along those shores related how they had come across the bones of oxen which they declared had been devoured by these serpents. They would even attack their ships, and capsize a trireme by fastening on to it.

In Pliny's *Natural History* the tale is told of how a Greek squadron, which Alexander the Great had sent out upon a voyage of discovery, was thrown into near-panic by sea serpents more than thirty feet long while the ships were crossing the Persian Gulf. But after all, thirty feet is no great length, and certainly not to be compared with the 200-foot monster described by Olaus Magnus in his famous *History of the Northern People.* Twenty feet in girth, this marine reptile was found living, says the Archbishop of Upsala, in caves and rocks of the sea coast around Bergen. Leaving its lair on fine summer nights, it would make its way ashore to devour calves, lambs, and hogs. "He hath commonly," writes Olaus Magnus, "hair hanging from his neck a Cubit long, and sharp Scales, and is black, and he hath flaming shining eyes. This snake disquiets the Shippers, and he puts up his head on high, like a pillar, and catcheth away men, and he devours them." In the woodcut which accompanies this account, a sea serpent is shown seizing a sailor from the deck of a ship, while his companions run for safety, leaving the unfortunate man to his fate.

The fabulous had a great fascination for Olaus Magnus. He loved to encounter the supernatural, and in accordance with the contemporary spirit of religion, his faith added to the credulity which dominated his other visions, in which he fancied he could perceive behind these monsters demons and the portents of the fall of empires. Thus to him the sea serpent presaged "some wonderful change of the Kingdom near at hand; namely that the Princes shall die, or be banished; or some tumultuous wars shall presently follow."

Half a century after the publication of the *History of the Northern People,* the same description of a sea serpent is found in the compilation of Konrad Gesner. In this work, however, the sea serpent is reported as being only about ninety feet long, although the illustration to the text shows a creature at least 600 feet in length, with its forepart wrapped

around a large sailing vessel. "So far as real snakes go," writes Richard Lewinsohn, "the sea serpent had a magnificent advantage over its relatives. Real sea snakes . . . of which there are some fifty species in the tropical waters between East Africa and the Pacific, seldom grow much over two yards long."

Up to the beginning of the eighteenth century most of the tales of sea serpents were the exaggerated accounts of second-hand reports from fishermen, and the measurements of anglers have long been suspect. But in 1734 came an eyewitness account by a highly respectable Norwegian missionary, Hans Egede, who later became an archbishop. This is what he saw (or imagined he saw) when on a voyage to Greenland:

"Anno 1734. July. On the 6th appeared a very terrible sea animal, which raised itself so high above the water that its head reached above our maintop. It had a long, sharp snout, and blew like a whale, had broad, large flippers, and the body was, as it were, covered with a hard skin, and it was very wrinkled and uneven on its skin; moreover on the lower part it was formed like a snake, and when it went under water again, it cast itself backwards, and in doing so it raised its tail above the water, a whole ship-length from its body."

An illustration of the sea serpent seen by Hans Egede is given in Pontoppidan's *Natural History of Norway*.

Pontoppidan himself spent many years investigating stories of the kraken and the sea serpent. "I have questioned its existence myself," he writes about the sea serpent, "till that suspicion was removed by full and sufficient evidence from credible and experienced fishermen and sailors in Norway, of which there are hundreds who can testify that they have annually seen it."

According to this prelate (he was Bishop of Bergen), these creatures kept continuously to the bottom of the sea except during the months of July and August, which was their spawning time. He was told by northern traders that the sea serpent

was known to throw itself across a vessel of some 100 tons burden and by its weight sink it to the bottom. This, Pontoppidan would not vouch for. "But," he says, "in all my enquiry about these affairs, I have hardly spoken with any intelligent person, born in the manor of Nordland, who was not able to give a pertinent answer and strong assurances of the existence of this fish."

Pontoppidan also quotes the experience of Lorenz von Ferry, Pilot General at Bergen, who encountered a sea serpent between Trondhjem and Molde, on the Norwegian coast, in August, 1746. "The head of this sea serpent," he wrote, "which it held more than two feet above the surface of the water, resembled that of a horse. It was of a greyish colour, and the mouth was quite black and very large. It had large black eyes and a long white mane, which hung down to the surface of the water. Besides the head and neck, we saw seven or eight folds, or coils, of this snake, which were very thick, and as far as we could guess there was a fathom's distance between each fold."

The nineteenth century gave us a host of stories concerning sea serpents, many of them amply documented. Perhaps the most famous of these tales was the one related by the captain and crew of H.M.S. *Daedalus*, which secured the honour of some lively drawings in the *Illustrated London News* of October 28, 1848. *Daedalus*, a corvette in the East India Service, returned to Plymouth on October 4 of that year, and on coming ashore her crew gave an exciting account of their encounter with a giant sea serpent in the South Atlantic. This being published in *The Times*, the admiral commanding at Devonport asked the captain of *Daedalus*, Peter M'Quhae, for an explanation.

M'Quhae at once sent a reply stating that at 5 P.M. on August 6 an unusual object was seen rapidly approaching the ship from before the beam, and was thus described by the captain:

"On our attention being called to the object, it was discovered to be an enormous serpent, with head and shoulders kept about four feet constantly above the surface of the sea, and as nearly as we could approximate by comparing it with the length of what our main-topsail yard would show in the water, there was at the very least sixty feet of the animal *à fleur d'eau*, no portion of which was, to our perception, used in propelling it through the water, either by vertical or horizontal undulation. It passed rapidly, but so close under our lee quarter, that had it been a man of my acquaintance I should easily have recognized his features with the naked eye; and it did not, either in approaching the ship or after it had passed our wake, deviate in the slightest degree from its course to the S.W., which it held on at the pace of from twelve to fifteen miles per hour, apparently on some determined purpose.

"The diameter of the serpent was about fifteen or sixteen inches behind the head, which was, without any doubt, that of a snake, and it was never, during the twenty minutes that it continued in sight of our glasses, once below the surface of the water; its colour a dark brown, with yellowish white about the throat. It had no fins, but something like a mane of a horse, or rather a bunch of seaweed, washed about its back. It was seen by the quartermaster, the boatswain's mate, and the man at the wheel, in addition to myself and officers above mentioned."

Naturally this report excited considerable interest among scientists and aroused many conflicting opinions. Sir Richard Owen, of the Royal College of Surgeons, a famous anatomist and zoologist, was convinced that the creature in question was one of the larger species of seals, and no serpent at all. It seems hardly likely that an experienced naval captain would not know a seal when he saw one, and with all the witnesses agreeing that some sixty feet of the animal was visible on the surface, that hypothesis seems ruled out. F.T. Bullen opted

for a rorqual in his book *Creatures of the Sea* (1904), but this suggestion hardly flatters M'Quhae's powers of observation; nor is Henry Lee's idea that the creature was a giant calamary or squid (*Sea Monsters Unmasked*, 1884) very credible. A man who had spent a lifetime at sea, and his companions as well, could hardly have failed to recognize either of these creatures, especially as they were so close to the unknown monster.

Off the coast of Invernesshire, in August, 1872, the Reverend John McRae and his friend the Reverend David Twopeny, caught sight of a strange marine animal as they were sailing down the Sound of Sleat in a small cutter, the *Leda*. In the very lengthy account of their experience which they published in the *Zoologist* they wrote:

"We perceived a dark mass about 200 yards astern of us to the North. While we were looking at it with our glasses (we had three on board) another similar black lump rose to the left of the first, leaving an interval between; then another and another followed, all in regular order. We did not doubt its being one living creature; it moved slowly across our wake and disappeared. Presently the first mass, which was evidently the head, reappeared, and was followed by the rising of the other black lumps as before. Sometimes three appeared, sometimes four, five, or six, and then sank again. The greatest number we counted was seven, making eight with the head."

The writers added a postscript to their account to the effect that they did not expect the public to believe in the existence of the creature they had seen, but that they considered themselves bound to leave a record of the event for naturalists to ponder over. However, these two clergymen were not the only persons to see this animal, for several other observers saw it from numerous points along Loch Hourn during the next few days.

Some three years later Captain George Drevar of the barque *Pauline* related how he and his crew, on July 8, 1875, saw

three large sperm whales, one of which was gripped around the body with two turns of what appeared to be a large serpent. "The head and tail appeared to have a length beyond the coils of about thirty feet, and its girth eight or nine feet. The serpent whirled its victim round and round for about fifteen minutes and then suddenly dragged the whale to the bottom head first." In this case what Captain Drevar witnessed was possibly a struggle between the whale and a giant squid, the great tentacles of which were the "serpent's coils" the crew of the *Pauline* had noticed.

In the winter of 1905, off the coast of Brazil, another strange marine creature was seen by those aboard the Earl of Crawford's yacht *Valhalla*. On this occasion the witnesses were well-known naturalists, who were engaged in scientific research in the South Atlantic and Indian oceans. Two of these observers were fellows of the Zoological Society of London – E.G.B. Meade-Waldo and Michael J. Nicoll – and therefore the report which they communicated to the Society may be read with less scepticism than is usually reserved for yarns about sea serpents. This is what Mr. Meade-Waldo wrote:

"On Dec. 7th, 1905, at 10.15 A.M. I was on the poop of the *Valhalla* with Mr. Nicoll, when he drew my attention to an object in the sea about 100 yards from the yacht. He said 'Is that the fin of a great fish?' I looked and immediately saw a large fin or frill sticking out of the water, dark seaweed-brown in colour, somewhat crinkled at the edge. It was apparently about six feet in length and projected from eighteen inches to two feet from the water. I could see, under the water to the rear of the frill, the shape of a considerable body. I got my field glasses on to it, and almost as soon as I had them on the frill, a great head and neck rose out of the water in front of the frill; the neck did not touch the frill in the water, but came out of the water in *front* of it, at a distance of certainly not less than eighteen inches, probably more.

"The neck appeared about the thickness of a slight man's body, and from seven to eight feet was out of the water; head and neck were all about the same thickness. The head had a very turtle-like appearance, as had also the eye. I could see the line of the mouth, but we were sailing pretty fast, and quickly drew away from the object, which was going very slowly. It moved its neck from side to side in a peculiar manner: the colour of the head and neck was dark brown above and whitish below — almost white I think."

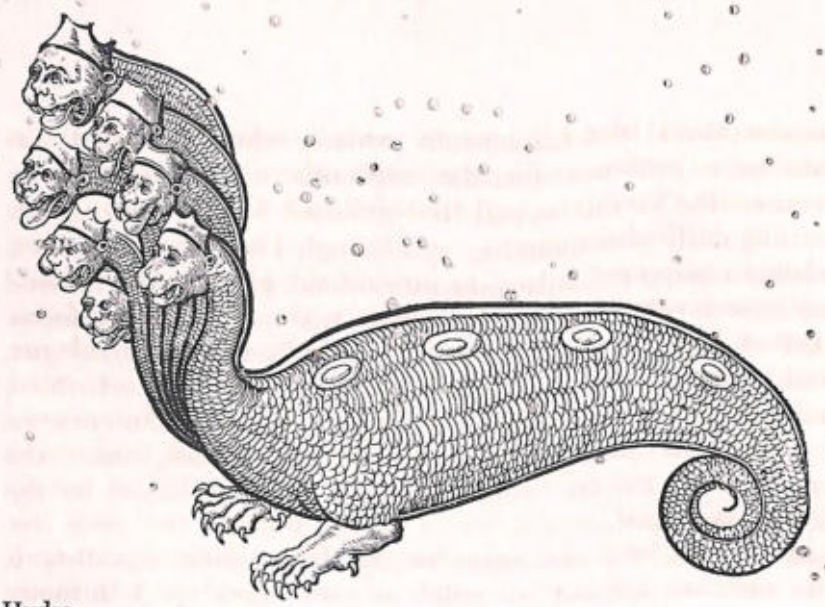
Michael Nicoll wrote later, in his book *Three Voyages of a Naturalist* (1908): "I feel sure that it was not a reptile that we saw, but a mammal. It is, of course, impossible to be certain of this, but the general appearance of the creature, especially the soft, almost rubber-like fin, give one this impression."

Reptile or mammal? One explanation of the sea serpent is that it may be a survival from among the many sea reptiles which we know once inhabited the seas — the ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs. After all, the fish *Latimeria*, rediscovered fairly recently after it had been considered extinct for centuries, is as old as the epoch of the dinosaurs. On the other hand, Dr. A.C. Oudemans, the famous Dutch naturalist, makes out a strong case, in his book *The Great Sea Serpent*, for the supposition that it is some gigantic aquatic mammal, an ancient species of whale perhaps.

The latest manifestation of the sea serpent is the notorious Loch Ness monster, which first reared its ugly head (at least, to the knowledge of journalists) in the summer of 1933. It was the sensation of that year's "silly season." One expedition sent by a daily newspaper even managed to find the creature's spoor, though later it transpired that a practical joker armed with an ashtray made from a dried hippopotamus hoof was the sole originator and begetter of this hoax. The monster reached the apogee of its fame with the appearance of a book devoted entirely to proving its existence. Although Com-

mander Gould did his best to provide what he hoped was conclusive evidence for the existence of the Loch Ness monster, the verdict is still "not proven." Most of the reports are singularly unconvincing, and though Loch Ness may well provide some previously unknown animal, naturalists will need much more conclusive evidence than is yet available. Professor J.L.B. Smith, of South Africa, a world-famous ichthyologist, does believe, however, in the existence of a Loch Ness monster, and suggests that it may be the serpent-like creature seen by two Scottish fishermen near Aberdeen, since the areas are not too far from each other, and are linked by the Caledonian canal.

In general, the consensus of opinion among scientists is that the "sea serpent" is either a giant squid or a hitherto unrecorded fish. We cannot neglect the possibility that some creatures as yet unknown to us exist in the deep sea.



Hydra
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

The Many-Headed Hydra

Seven great heads out of his body grew,
An iron breast, and back of scaly brass;
And all imbrued in blood his eyes did shine as glass,
His tail was stretched out in wondrous length.
Spenser: The Faerie Queene

This monster, a water serpent, born to Echidne under a plane tree at Amymone, lived in the Lernean marshes nearby, in Argolis. It had numerous heads and whenever one was cut off others grew in its place. The second labour which Eurystheus imposed upon Heracles was to destroy the Lernean Hydra. To make things more difficult for Heracles, Hera sent an enormous crab to help the Hydra. Upon the advice of Athene, Heracles compelled the Hydra to emerge from its lair by firing burning arrows, and when it did so

he sought to batter its heads with his great club; all in vain, for as soon as one was crushed others grew in its place. Meanwhile the crab nipped Heracles' foot with its great claws until he crushed it underfoot in his rage. Then he called upon Iolaus to help him. Iolaus, to prevent the Hydra from sprouting new heads, seared the stumps with burning brands as soon as Heracles had severed the heads. One head of the Hydra was immortal, and this Heracles cut off with his sword and buried under a great rock. He then dipped his arrows in the Hydra's blood, and henceforth any wound from them was fatal.

The ancient writers differ as to the number of heads the Hydra originally had. According to Robert Graves, the crab was introduced into the legend by astrologers so as to make Heracles' twelve labours correspond with the signs of the zodiac. Apollodorous of Athens, the son of Asclepiades, wrote (*c.* 120 B.C.): "This Hydra, nourished in the marshes of Lernea . . . had a huge body and nine heads, eight mortal but the ninth immortal." Spenser in the *Faerie Queene,* gives the monster seven. Seven and nine seem to have been the favourite numbers, but generally speaking the number varied according to the imagination of the writer.

In the large folio volume called *Locupletissimi Rerum Naturalium Thesauri Descriptio,* published at Amsterdam in 1734, containing an account of the collection of curiosities gathered together by the pharmacist Albertus Seba, there is a splendid engraving of a seven-headed Hydra on Plate CII, with this appended description:

"Here is the reproduction of an animal which is said to be the Serpent with seven heads. A stranger who in 1720 did me the honour of visiting my Cabinet of Natural Curiosities was the first to give me a drawing of this creature. He said he had actually seen the animal at Hamburg; that it resembled a serpent with seven raised heads, each with a gaping jaw filled with big and little teeth; that it had two feet only, and a large tail, so that although it passed for a seven-headed

Serpent it nevertheless approximated more to a Dragon than a Serpent. I confess that this story appeared to me somewhat paradoxical, and seemed more like a fable than the truth.

"But the following year Mr. F. Eilsen, a Minister of the Gospel at Wursten in the Duchy of Bremen, coming one day to look at my collection, told me a similar tale about this Hydra, and promised to obtain for me a drawing of this animal, which is in Hamburg. This was all the easier seeing that he was friendly with Messrs. Dreyern and Hambel, merchants of Hamburg, who owned this animal. He told me it had originally belonged to Count Königsmark, and after his death passed to the Count of Leeuwenhaupt. Since I had heard that it was offered for sale at 10,000 florins, the magnitude of the sum made me the more desirous of having a faithful drawing of the animal. Mr. Eilsen kept his word and procured for me the longed-for copy. I must confess that, not daring to put absolute trust in it, I wrote to my friend Mr. J.F. Natorp of Hamburg, whose hobby was natural history. He had seen this very Hydra with his own eyes and assures me that it owed nothing to artifice, but in truth was the work of Nature. This friend, at my request, sent me a drawing, life size and beautifully coloured, from which the engraving I give here has been made."

Behind the legend of the Hydra we can distinguish the octopus, with which the ancients were certainly familiar, for at Mycenae were found many gold ornaments bearing representations of this cephalopod mollusc with its eight suckered tentacles. Although no octopus found in the Aegean could have vied in size with the *Octopus apollyon* of the Pacific, which sometimes attains a diameter of more than twenty-five feet, nevertheless some Mediterranean octupuses are of considerable size. Henry Lee, in *Sea Fables Explained*, equates the Lernean Hydra with a giant octopus, and certainly the marble tablet in the Vatican of Heracles slaying that monster shows an unmistakable octopus, even if the sculptor has placed a serpent's head at the extremity of each tentacle.

Kraken
[Cahier & Martin: *Nouveaux Mélanges d'Archéologie*]

The Monstrous Kraken

Far, far beneath, in the abysmal sea,
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
The Kraken sleepeth. . . .

Tennyson: The Kraken

The story of this gigantic animal is a legend common in the Scandinavian countries – the fantastic tale of floating islands rising suddenly out of the sea and disappearing after a few hours. The common folk looked upon them as the underwater habitations of malign spirits who caused them to spring out of the water to terrify sailors and increase the hazards of their voyages.

It is evidently the kraken which Olaus Wormius describes under the name of *hafgufe*. He describes its sudden appearance upon the surface of the water as resembling the upheaval of an island rather than an animal (*similiorem insulae quam bestiae*), and adds that he never came across the carcass of one for the good reason that the kraken was reputed to live until the end of the world and that no instrument was able to terminate the life of so monstruous a creature. Christian Paullinus (1643-1712), a native of Eisenach, described a creature which rose from the sea off the coast of Finland and was of such a size that a regiment of soldiers could manoeuvre on its back.

A Dane named Bartholinus tells a rather amusing story of how the Bishop of Midaros, travelling home to his own country from foreign parts, found what he took to be an island and upon it erected an altar and performed Mass. But the island was in reality a kraken, which respectfully waited until the ceremony was over and the prelate had departed before slowly sinking beneath the waves.

Pontoppidan, in his *Natural History of Norway*, refers to the kraken as "the largest and most surprising of all the animal creation," an assertion which he defends by telling us that "its back or upper part, which seems to be in appearance about a mile and a half in circumference, looks at first like a number of small islands surrounded with something that floats and fluctuates like sea-weeds." The worthy Bishop of Bergen has often been considered a Scandinavian Ananias, though rather unjustly, for he never wittingly propagated falsehoods, but in his desire, as he himself expressed it, "to extend the popular knowledge of the glorious works of a beneficent Creator," he placed too much faith in the superstitious beliefs and wildly exaggerated stories of sailors and fishermen. Though he did his best to separate truth from fiction, he lacked scientific training. It must not be forgotten that even the great Linnaeus was at first a believer in the

kraken, which he catalogued in the first edition of his *Systema Naturae* as *Sepia microcosmos,* though omitting it from subsequent editions. At least Pontoppidan, although greatly exaggerating its size, did realize that the kraken was not the fabulous creature that the older writers had imagined and ventured an opinion that it "may be reckoned of the Polype, or of the Starfish kind." He continues: "The Polype or Starfish have amongst their various species, some that are much larger than others; and, according to all appearance, amongst the very largest inhabitants of the ocean. If the axiom be true that greatness or littleness makes no change in the species, then this Kraken must be of the Polypus kind, notwithstanding its enormous size."

The Frenchman Denis de Montfort, whose *Histoire . . . des Mollusques* appeared between 1802 and 1805, not only believed in the kraken but also gave a lurid account of a species of octopus which he termed a *poulpe colossal.* He tells how one of these creatures attacked a three-masted sailing ship off the coast of Angola, and accompanied his narrative with a drawing showing a gigantic cuttlefish throwing its great tentacles, thicker than the masts, over the vessel and attempting to drag it down to the ocean bed. But whereas the Bishop of Bergen was doing his best to ascertain the truth, De Montfort seems to have set out deliberately to gull the public, for we find him gravely asserting that six men-of-war captured from the French in the West Indies by Rodney in 1782, together with four British ships detailed to guard the prizes, were all suddenly engulfed not by a sudden squall but by colossal cuttlefish. Official documents prove, however, that this creature was the product of De Montfort's imagination and that the ships foundered during a violent storm "exceeding in degree everything of the kind that the oldest seaman in the fleet had ever seen, or had any conception of."

Was the monster described by Pontoppidan akin to the one known to Trebius Niger whom Pliny quotes in his *Natural*

History? Pliny writes of a great monster with enormous arms which emerged each night from the sea to gorge itself on the salted tunny in the curing ponds at Rocadillo in Spain. Understandably this annoyed the keepers of the fish-ponds, and as Pliny remarks, in Holland's translation, "in the end he gat himselfe the anger and displeasure of the masters of the said ponds and cisterns, with his continuall and immeasurable filching." This predatory monster was finally set upon by savage dogs and after a tremendous fight it was killed, and its head taken to the local proconsul, Lucullus. This head was reported to be as big as a 90-gallon cask. The weight of the creature was 700 pounds and it had arms some 30 feet long. It was probably an enormous octopus or a huge cuttlefish of the squid type. The largest species of squid, the *Architeuthis*, often has tenacles 30 feet long, and some weigh nearly a ton; but such giants are not normally encountered off Spain, but rather in the waters off Japan and Alaska.

In the British Museum's copy of Pontoppidan's *Natural History of Norway* is inserted a letter in manuscript, which runs:

> To the printer of the St. J. Chronicle
> Sir,
>
> As there are still some people who doubt the existence of the Kraken, notwithstanding the testimony of the ingenious Bishop Pontoppidan in his Natural History of Norway, I inclose you an authentic Deposition upon the subject which I doubt not will convince the most incredulous; if any one will inquire after Robert Jamieson he will be found to be a man of unblemished Reputation and every one who is acquainted with the customs of the Western Isles must know that Officers before whom it was sworn are of such Weight there as to preclude all Idea of their having been wilfully deceived.
>
> I am your obedient servant
> Philalethes

The deposition runs as follows:

> Rothesay, in the Island of Bute, the 20th day of April, 1775.

. . . examined upon oath that he was commander of the Buss called the *Janet* of Port Glasgow while she was employed in the British White Herring Fishery last season; that the Vessel being under sail at noon on or about the 9th or 10th August, 1774, ten or twelve leagues Westward from that part of Rossshire which lies between Ron-Sloir of Assynt and Loch Ninver and the deponent being then in the Cabbin one of his men called him up to look at an island which had just made its appearance in the sea; that the Deponent came upon Deck accordingly and saw the object distant from the Vessel about three miles or a little more in a E.N.E. direction from him and between the Vessel and the Continent; that he joined in opinion with his crew which consisted of nine men besides himself that it was an Island, which he computed to be about a mile and a half in Length, rising in the middle to the height of thirty feet or thereby above the surface of the water and as he imagined it tapered considerably towards each end, but that he could not possibly form any estimate of its breadth across; that it remained in view and apparently without Motion during the space of five or six Minutes, after which it sunk down slowly until it was entirely hid from View; that afterwards it rose and sunk alternately two different times and on every view the Deponent had of it the like inactive form was presented as at first and its continuance on the surface was about five or six minutes each time; that its rising and sinking was always slow and gradual, and occasioned no Whirlpool or other extraordinary commotion in the sea so far as the Deponent could perceive; and further deposes that the space which entervened [*sic*] from the first time he saw it until its last Disappearance might be about 24 minutes.

The deposition was signed by Robert Jamieson and witnessed by the commissary John Blain, and also acknowledged before James McNeil, Esq., J.P., of Killmery. A note by the commissary adds: "I lately met with one of the men who was on board the *Janet* with Robert Jamieson in August 1774, and upon my questioning him he concurred with the said Jamieson in every particular."

Demon Mermaid
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium Aquatilium*]

Mermen and Mermaids

He mounted on his berry-brown steed,
And merry, merry rade he on,
Till he came to the wall o'Stream,
And there he saw the mermaiden.

Ballad of Clark Colven

Legends of the union of man and fish seem to be even more ancient than those of man and beast, and man and bird. Berosus, a Babylonian priest of the third century B.C., who wrote a work on the chronology of the Chaldeans in which he incorporated much ancient lore, gives an account of a creature named Oannes, which, he writes, "had all the body of a fish, but below the head of the fish another head, which was that of a man; also the feet of a man, which came out of its fish's tail. It had, as well, human arms and a human voice."

This creature spent its days among the people, taking no nourishment, but at night it retired to the sea, for it was amphibious. According to the writer this creature, which came out of the Erythrian Sea (which we call the Persian Gulf),

taught the people of Babylon the arts and sciences. Alexander, called Polyhistor, who flourished around 88 B.C., wrote that in far-off times there were creatures in which were combined the limbs of every species of animal.

One of the earliest representations of a merman – half man, half fish – is found among the ancient sculptures of the excavated palace at Khorsabad, and this shows no fish's head, as in Berosus, nor human feet, but simply the upper part of a man joined to a fish's tail. This may be identified with the Babylonian water divinity Hea, which in turn was probably the biblical Dagon, though some authorities make Dagon an earth god.

Atergatis, a goddess of the Syrians, was also a fish divinity. Her image was at first that of a fish's body with human extremities, but in course of time it altered to that of a being, the upper half of whose body was of human female form and the lower half that of a fish. A representation of Atergatis on Phoenician coins found at Marseilles show what has come to be regarded as the typical mermaid. Atergatis was worshipped by the Greeks as Derceto, whom some supposed to be the same as Astarte. Lucian says: "In Phoenicia I saw the image of Derceto – truly a strange sight! For she had the half of a woman, and from the thighs downwards a fish's tail." According to the legend, Derceto had a child by a young Assyrian and, ashamed at her incontinence, abandoned her baby and threw herself into a lake, where her body was transformed into that of a fish. The child lived and was called Semiramis.

Astarte, however, having in a later metamorphosis become Aphrodite, the perfect woman, the fish origin was transferred to her attendants, the Tritons and Nereids. These were creatures embodying the finest type of human beauty above the waist, joined to the tail end of a fish. The Tritons are frequently represented as drawing the chariot of Aphrodite and rendering her other services, though they themselves possessed powers over the waves and storms by virtue of their

rank as sea gods. Ancient Corinthian coins show Aphrodite in a chariot drawn by a Triton and a Nereid.

Pliny has a passage in his writings relative to the Tritons and Nereids. "A deputation from Olisipo [Lisbon] that had been sent for that purpose, brought word to the Emperor Tiberius that a Triton had been seen and heard in a certain cavern, blowing a Conch shell, and of the form in which they are usually represented. Nor yet is the figure generally attributed to the Nereids at all a fiction, only in them the portion of the body that resembles the human figure is still rough all over with scales. For one of these creatures was seen upon the same shores, and, as it died, its plaintive murmurs were heard, even by the inhabitants, at a distance."

Thus we see that from the earliest times the union of the human and fish forms was well known to men, since they were familiar with it both from incised and sculptured representations. But gradually, with the passage of time, the symbolic aspect was lost sight of. From being a creature of myth or poetic fancy mermen and mermaids became simply what *Physiologus* curtly calls beasts of the sea, and the existence of such creatures was as firmly established in the Middle Ages as the existence of any marine animal.

The chronicler of the *Histoire de la Compagnie de Jésus* records in all solemnity that seven mermen and mermaids were captured at Manaar in 1560 and taken to Goa, where their bodies were dissected by Demas Bosquez, physician to the Viceroy, and found to have an internal structure exactly similar to that of the human body. Sir Richard Whitbourne, that Devon sea-dog who wrote a *Discourse and Discovery of New-found-land* (1620), relates the following episode:

"Now also I will not omit to relate something of a strange creature, which I first saw there in the year 1610, in a morning early as I was standing by the River side, in the harbour of St. Johns, which very swiftly came swimming towards me, looking cheerfully on my face, as it had been a woman: by

the face, eyes, nose, mouth, chin, ears, neck and forehead, it seemed to be beautiful and in those parts well proportioned, having round about the head many blue streaks resembling hair, but certainly it has no hair. . . . It swam towards the place where a little before I landed, and it did often look back towards me; whereby I beheld the shoulders and back down to the middle to be so square, white and smooth as the back of a man; and from the middle to the hinder part it was pointing in proportion something like a broad hooked Arrow: how it was in the forepart from the neck and shoulders I could not well discern. It came shortly after to a Boat . . . wherein one William Hawkridge, then my servant, was, and did put both his hands upon the side of the Boat, and did strive much to come in to him, and divers then in the same Boat; whereat they were afraid, and one of them struck it a full blow on the head, whereby it fell off from them." And Whitbourne concludes: "This, I suppose, was a Mermaid or Merman."

Up to the seventeenth century the mermaid was a creature in which implicit belief was placed, and it appears in medieval heraldry, on paving-tiles, on church bosses, and in Gothic stone and wood carving. The mermaid also figured as a tavern sign, and undoubtedly the most famous inn sporting that sign was the Mermaid Tavern established in Bread Street, Cheapside, in 1603, and patronized, we are told, by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, Carew and other famous literary figures.

The famous navigator Henry Hudson relates, in his narrative of his voyages, the following incident which occurred while he was forcing a passage through the ice near Novaya Zemlya. "This morning one of our company, looking overboard, saw a mermaid, and calling up some of the company to see her, one more came up, and by that time she was come close to the ship's side, looking earnestly on the men. A little while after a sea came and overturned her. From the navel upward

her back and breast were like a woman's, as they say that saw her; her body as big as one of ours; her skin very white, and long hair hanging down behind, of colour black. In her going down they saw her tail, which was like the tail of a porpoise and speckled like a mackerel. Their names that saw her were Thomas Hilles and Robert Rayney." Whatever they saw, it was hardly likely to have been either a seal or a walrus, both of which would have been quite familiar to such seasoned mariners.

Even the more rational eighteenth century did not abandon the belief in mermaids. In 1727 was published Valentijn's description of the Dutch East Indies. Part of the chapter devoted to the fishes of Amboyna contains a long description of *Zee-menschen* (mermen) and *Zee-wyven* (mermaids), and of the existence of these creatures he has not the slightest doubt. He relates how, in 1653, when a Dutch lieutenant was leading a party of soldiers along the coast in Amboyna they caught sight of two mermen swimming near the beach. "They had long and flowing hair of a colour between grey and green," he writes, "and from their swimming side by side it was presumed they were male and female. Six weeks afterwards the creatures were again seen by him and more than fifty witnesses at the same place by clear daylight."

The credulous Valentijn remarks: "What do they say to the fact that in 1712 a mermaid was not only seen but captured near the island of Boero, five feet, Rhineland measure, in height; which lived four days and seven hours, but, refusing all food, died without leaving any intelligible account of herself?" This unfortunate creature is said to have been captured in 1712 and presented to the Dutch governor, Vander Stell and an engraving of it is shown on a plate in Valentijn's book amongst several fishes of Amboyna.

This was copied, as were other plates in the volume, from drawings made by Samuel Fallours, official painter to the Dutch East India Company, and previously published in 1717

by Louis Renard at Amsterdam under the title of *Poissons, Ecrivisses, et Crabbes des Isles Moluques et Terres Australes.*

As further proof of the existence of mermen and mermaids, Valentijn in his book triumphantly points out that in Holland, in the year 1404, a mermaid was driven through a breach in the dyke of Edam as the result of a storm and was found stranded in shallow water by some local girls, who took her home, dressed her in woman's clothes and taught her to spin. Later she was taken to Amsterdam, where she lived for several years, and finally died in the Roman Catholic faith. "But this," adds Valentijn, who was himself a Calvinist, "in no way militates against the truth of her story."

In his *Natural History of Norway* Pontoppidan has something to say about the mermaids of that part of the world. "Amongst the sea monsters," he writes, "which are in the North Sea, and are often seen, I shall give the first place to the Hav-manden, or Merman, whose mate is called Hav-fruen, or Mermaid. The existence of this creature is questioned by many, nor is it at all to be wondered at, because most of the accounts we have had of it are mixed with mere fables, and may be looked upon as idle tales." In this category he places the story related by Besenius, in his life of Frederick II, of a mermaid called Isbrandt, who in the course of conversation with a peasant at Samsoe, foretold the birth of King Christian IV, "and made the peasant preach repentance to the courtiers, who were very much given to drunkenness." Similarly he dismisses as an idle story the account of a merman caught by two Danish senators, Ulf Rosensparre and Christian Holch, while returning to Denmark from Norway. This creature gave the two worthies a terrible fright, so that they were only too glad to set him at liberty, for as he lay upon the deck he spoke to them in Danish and threatened that if they did not let him go "the ship should be cast away, and every soul of the crew should perish."

"When such fictions as these," writes Pontoppidan, "are

mixed with the history of the Merman, and when that creature is represented as a prophet and an orator; when they give the Mermaid a melodious voice, and tell us that she is a fine singer, we need not wonder that so few people of senses will give credit to such absurdities, or that they even doubt the existence of such a creature." But, the Bishop adds, "whilst we have no ground to believe all these fables, yet, as to the existence of the creature we may safely give our assent to it." He goes on to point out that hundreds of persons in the diocese of Bergen had affirmed in the strongest possible terms that they had seen such creatures. He quotes the story by Luke Debes, in his *Description of the Faroe Islands* (1673), of a mermaid seen in 1670 by many people at Faroe. She came close to the shore and stood there for some two and a half hours, up to her waist in water. The hair of her head fell down to the surface of the water and in her right hand she held a fish.

The general interest in mermaids was frequently exploited by unscrupulous showmen. The age of Elizabeth I was a period fertile in wondrous exhibitions, and wild Indians, curious fishes and crocodiles attracted great crowds. In 1604 an account was printed "of a monstrous fish that appeared in the form of a woman from her waist upwards, seen in the sea." As late as the early nineteenth century we read in John Nichols' *Literary Anecdotes,* regarding Dr. James Parsons' drawings: "Amongst other curiosities is an exact delineation of a human foetus which was the subject of an extraordinary imposture – the upper part being well made and in good proportion, the lower extremities monstrous. It was enclosed in a glass case, and shown at the Heathcock, Charing Cross, as 'a surprising young Mermaid, taken on the coast of Acapulco.' This figure the Doctor drew; and caused the showman to be turned out of town."

In English poetry the mermaid has been the subject of many charming verses, and Shakespeare alludes to it in his plays half a dozen times. His best-known reference occurs in

the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Oberon addresses Puck, saying:

> Thou rememb'rest
> Since once I sat upon a promontory,
> And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
> Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,
> That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
> And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
> To hear the sea-maid's music.

John Swan's *Speculum Mundi, or A Glasse representing the Face of the World*, was published in 1635. The book is full of curious lore which is typical of the beliefs of his contemporaries, and there is no question that he believed in mermen and mermaids. "The mermaids and the men-fish," he writes, "seem to me the most strange fish in the waters. Some have supposed them to be devils or spirits, in regard to their whooping noise they make. For (as if they had power to raise extraordinarie storms and tempests) the windes blow, seas rage, and clouds drop, presently after they seem to call." He does not suggest, however, that they are responsible for the storms, but that a natural instinct warns them of a change of weather before it becomes apparent to man.

One of the most detailed descriptions of a merman ever printed is to be found in Mrs. Morgan's *A Tour to Milford Haven in the Year 1791*. This was taken down from an eye-witness account by one Henry Reynolds of Penyhold, Pembrokeshire, who saw the event he relates at Haverfordwest, towards the end of December, 1782. From his farm above the cliffs he caught sight in the sea of what appeared to be a person standing upright in the water. He was considerably surprised, since he knew the sea to be very deep at the spot in question, and he went down to the water's edge to investigate. Here is his description of the creature that he saw:

"From the bottom there went down a tail much resembling

that of a large Conger Eel. Its tail in deep water was straight downwards, but in shallow water it would turn it on one side. The tail was continually moving in a circular manner. The form of its body and arms was entirely human, but its arms and hands seemed rather thick and short in proportion to its body. The form of the head, and all the features of the face, were human also, but the nose rose high between its eyes, was pretty long, and seemed to terminate very sharp. Its head was white like its body, without hair; but from its forehead there arose a brownish substance, of three or four fingers breadth, which turned up over its head, and went down over its back, and reached quite into the water. This substance did not at all resemble hair, but was thin, compact and flat, not much unlike a ribbon. It did not adhere to the back part of its head, or neck, or back, for the creature lifted it up from its neck and washed under it. It washed frequently under its arms and about its body. It swam about the bay, and particularly round a little rock which Reynolds was within ten or twelve yards of. He stayed about an hour looking at it. It was so near to him that he could perceive its motion through the water was very rapid, and that, when it turned, it put one hand into the water, all the time he was looking at it. It looked attentively at him and the cliffs, and seemed to take great notice of the birds flying over its head. Its looks were wild and fierce; but it made no noise, nor did it grin, or in any way distort its face. When he left it, it was almost a hundred yards from him; and when he returned with some others to look at it, it was gone."

Probably those he had gone to fetch considered that Reynolds had been drinking too freely; but we are told that the farmer's account was taken down by a reputable physician, Dr. George Phillips of Haverfordwest, in the presence of a number of respectable citizens.

Interest in the mermaid continued unflaggingly throughout the eighteenth century, and faked mermaids were made and

exhibited up and down the country. Here is an advertisement from the London *Daily Post* of January 23, 1738:

"To be Seen, next door to the Crown Tavern in Threadneedle Street, behind the Royal Exchange, at One Shilling each, the Surprising Fish of Maremaid, taken by eight Fishermen on Friday the 9th of September last, at Topsham Bar, near Exeter, and has been shewn to several Gentlemen, and those of the Faculty, in the Cities of Bath, Exeter and Bristol, who declare never to have seen the like, so remarkable is this curiosity among the Wonders of Creation. This uncommon Species of Nature represents from the Collarbone down the Body what the Antients called a Maremaid, has a Wing to each shoulder like those of a Cherubim mentioned in History, with regular Ribs, Breasts, Thighs and Feet, the Joints thereto having their proper Motions, and to each Thigh a Fin; the Tail resembles a Dolphin's, which turns up to the Shoulders, the forepart of the Body very smooth, but the skin of the Back rough; the back part of the Head like a Lyon, has a large Mouth, sharp Teeth, two Eyes, Spout holes, Nostrils, and a thick Neck."

The advertisement certainly mentions that this mountebank's swindle had been shown to the Faculty; but was perhaps wise to omit what the members of the Faculty had to say about it!

Although by the time the nineteenth century arrived most of the fables set down by the early natural historians had been finally discredited, stories of mermaids and sea serpents continually cropped up, and their existence was frequently vouched for in the press by seemingly unimpeachable witnesses. The story of the Caithness mermaid was told by a schoolmaster of Thurso, William Munro, who published it in *The Times* of London on September 8, 1809. During a walk along the shore of Sandside Bay he caught sight of a figure resembling an unclothed human female sitting on a rock combing its hair, which flowed around its shoulders in true Lorelei

fashion. This mermaid, according to Munro, was seen by many others besides himself, and often at a distance of no more than twenty yards or so. Among these spectators was a Miss Mackay, who described the creature's face as being "round and plump, and of a bright pink hue." Whatever animal lay behind this story, we must not forget that William Munro was both an educated man and a hardheaded Scot. He was not romancing for the sake of notoriety.

Faked mermaids have always been a money-spinner for showmen, and two excellent specimens were exhibited not so long ago at the British Museum; these were believed to date from the seventeenth century, when such curios were highly prized by collectors. One faked mermaid was the subject of a suit in Chancery around the year 1836 when two showmen, who had been exhibiting this mermaid in the West End of London, quarrelled over the sharing of the profits, and a legal action was started to determine who was the rightful owner of this profitable fake. According to F.E. Hulme, the mermaid in question was made out of the skin of a monkey, stuffed and varnished, cleverly attached to the body and tail of a salmon.

Bishop-Fish
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

Monk-Fish
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

Bishop-Fish and Monk-Fish

La Mer poissons en abondance apporte,
Par dons divins que devons estimer.
Mais fort estrange est le Moyne de Mer,
Qui est ainsi que ce pourtrait le porte.

La terre n'a Evesques seulement,
Qui sont pour bulle en grand honneur et tiltre,
L'evesque croist en mer semblablement,
Ne parlant point, combien qu'il porte Mitre.

These lines accompany two pictures of fishes in a curious little book by Johannes Sluper.* The first is of the monk-fish and the second of the bishop-fish. Gesner gives similar pictures (Aldrovandi likewise), and the description of these fishes emphasizes a curious belief of the Middle Ages that everything in the air or on earth had its double in the sea. Du Bartas, in his *Divine Weekes & Works*, writes in a similar strain:

*Omnium fere Gentium, (Antwerp, 1572).

Seas have (as well as skies) Sun, Moon and Stars;
(As well as ayre) Swallows, and Rooks, and Stares;
(As well as earth) Vines, Roses, Nettles, Millions,*
Pinks, Gilliflowers, Mushrooms, and many millions
Of other Plants (more rare and strange than these)
As very fishes living in the Seas;
And also Rams, Calfs, Horses, Hares, and Hogs,
Wolves, Lions, Urchins, Elephants and Dogs,
Yea, Men and Mayds; and (which I more admire)
The mytred Bishop and the cowled Fryer;
Whereof examples but a few years since
Were shewn the Norways and Polonian Prince.

In the last couplet he is alluding to Gesner's information that the monk-fish which he illustrates was caught off the coast of Norway and that the bishop-fish was seen off the coast of Poland in 1531.

In Chapter XVI of *Le Livre des Poissons,* Pierre Belon writes: "In our time, in Norway, there was caught, after a great storm, a sea monster to which all those who saw it straightway gave the name of Monk, for it had the face of a man, albeit rude and ungracious, the head close-shaven and smooth. On its shoulders, as it were, a monk's hood, with two long pinnate fins for arms, and the end of the body terminating in a long tail. The portrait from which I have had the present drawing made was given to me by the most noble lady Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre, which she had had from a gentleman who was taking a similar one to the Emperor Charles V, at that time in Spain. This gentleman said he had seen the monster, just as it appeared in the portrait, when it was thrown by the storm-tossed waves on to the beach of a place called Dieze, near the town of Denelopoch, in Norway. I have seen a similar portrait in Rome which differs in no way from mine."

*Obsolete form for "melons."

Of Swamfisck, Sahab, Circhos, and Others

All's fish they get
That cometh to net.
Thomas Tusser: Hundred Points of Good Husbandry

Olaus Magnus describes for our enjoyment some amazing denizens of the sea. One of these is the Swamfisck, of which he writes: "The first Monster that comes is of a round form, in Norway called *Swamfisck*, the greatest glutton of all other sea-monsters. For he is scarce satisfied though he eat continually. He is said to have no distinct stomach, and so what he eats turns into the thickness of his body, that he appears nothing else than one Lump of Conjoyned Fat. He dilates and extends himself beyond measure, and when he can be extended no more, he easily casts out fishes by his mouth because he wants a neck as other fishes do. His mouth and belly are continued one to the other. But this creature is so thick that when there is danger he can (like the Hedge-Hog) re-double his flesh, fat and skin, and contract and cover himself; nor doth he that but to his own loss, because fearing Beasts that are his Enemies, he will not open himself when he is opressed with hunger, but lives by feeding on his own flesh, choosing rather to be consumed in part by himself than to be totally devoured by Wild Beasts." Another writer relates that when danger threatens the Swamfisck, "he will so winde up himselfe and cover his head with the skinne and substance of his own body that he is then bent like unto a piece of dead fish, and nothing like himself."

The Sahab was another marine monster described by Olaus Magnus, who tells us that "it hath small feet in respect of its great body, but he hath one long one, which he useth in place of a hand to defend all his parts; and with that he puts meat into his mouth, and digs up grass." Presumably an

amphibious animal, it had cow's feet, and when swimming spouted like a whale.

The Circhos, according to the same writer, is another sea monster, "which hath a crusty and soft Skin, partly black, partly red, and hath two cloven places in his Foot, that serve for to make three Toes. The right foot of this animal is very small, but the left is great and long; and therefore, when he walks all his body leans on the left side, and he draws his right foot after him. When the Ayr is calm he walketh, but when the Wind is high, and the Sky cloudy, he applies himself to the Rocks, and rests unmoved, and sticks fast, that he can scarce be pulled off."

Such is the angler's reputation (possibly unjustified) for exaggeration that all fishy stories arouse some degree of disbelief. A certain Edward Webb, a "master-gunner," whose travels were published in 1590, tells us that in Syria there is a river well-stocked with salmon trout and suchlike fish, "but no Jew can catch them, though either Christian or Turk shall catch them in abundance, with great ease."

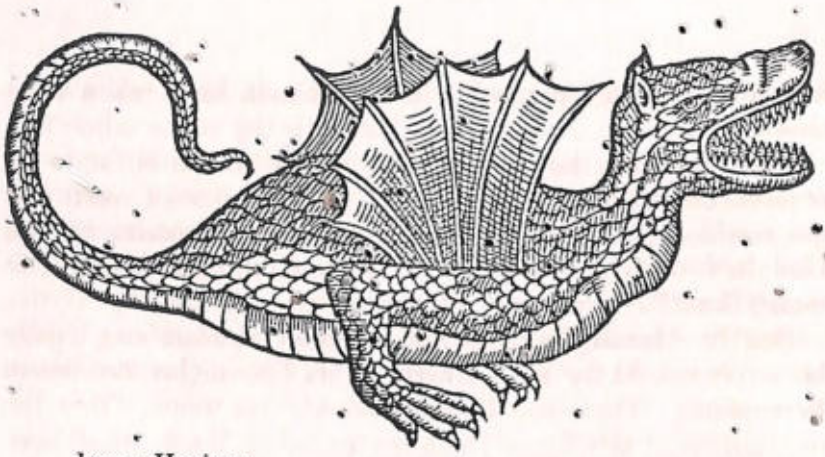
But Sir John Mandeville's story concerning the fish in the country called Calonak takes some beating. I will modernize the spelling, because the early texts of his *Travels* are difficult to follow for readers unused to old spelling. He writes:

"And in that Isle there is a great Marvel, more to speak of than in any part of the World. For all manner of Fishes, that are there in the sea about it, come there once a year, each manner of divers fishes, one manner of kind after another. And they cast themselves on the Sea Bank of that Isle, in such great plenty and multitude, that no man can see the sea for fish. And there they abide for three days: and every man of the Country taketh of them as many as he liketh. And after the third day that manner of fish departeth and goeth to the Sea. And after them come another multitude of fish of another kind, and behave in the same manner as the first did for another three days. And after them another; till all the divers

manner of Fishes have been there, and men have taken what they like of them. And no man knoweth the cause wherefore this may be. But they of the Country say that it is for to do reverence to her King, that, as they say, is the most worthy in the world; because that he fulfilleth the Commandment that God bade to Adam and Eve, when God said *Crescite & multiplicamini & replete Terram.*"

But for a catalogue of marine monsters Spenser can hardly be surpassed, in the second book of his *Faerie Queene,* where he writes:

> Eftsoones they saw a hideous hoast arrayd,
> Of huge sea monsters, such as living sence dismayd.
>
> Most ugly shapes, and horrible aspects,
> Such as dame Nature selfe mote feare to see,
> Or shame, that ever should so fowle defects
> From her most cunning hand escaped bee;
> All dreadfull pourtraicts of deformitee;
> Spring-headed Hydraes, and sea-shouldring Whales,
> Great whirlpooles, which all fishes make to flee,
> Bright Scolopendraes, arm'd with silver scales,
> Mighty Monoceros, with immeasured tayles.
>
> The dreadfull Fish, that hath deserv'd the name
> Of Death, and like him lookes in dreadfull hew,
> The griesly Wasserman, that makes his game
> The flying ships with swiftness to pursew,
> The horrible Sea-satyre, that deth shew
> His fearfull face in time of greatest storme,
> Huge Ziffius, whom Mariners eschew
> No lesse than rockes (as travellers inform),
> And greedy Rosmarines with visages deform.
>
> All these, and thousand thousands many more,
> And more deformed Monsters thousand fold,
> With dreadful noise and hollow rombling rore,
> Came rushing, in the fomy waves enrold,
> Which seem'd to fly for feare, them to behold.



Jenny Haniver.
[Topsell: *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes,* 1607]

Jenny Haniver

It is unlikely that you will find Jenny Hanivers listed in a zoological textbook, for they are man-made. The name is applied by antiquarians to the body of a real animal or animals transformed by misplaced human ingenuity into the likeness of some imaginary monster. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries monsters became desiderata for the cabinets of collectors, and since wherever demand exists there is always a supply, hundreds of specimens were manufactured by the unscrupulous for the credulous.

Both Gesner and Aldrovandi mention them, and some good specimens are shown in the latter's *History of Serpents and Dragons.* In his lengthy account of dragons, Aldrovandi points out how it was possible for a skilful operator to manufacture a credible dragon by clever manipulation of the body of a giant ray. Objects like dried lizards, with bats' wings deftly attached, were sold as baby dragons, and the Japanese excelled at producing faked mermaids by joining the tail of a

fish to the upper part of a small animal, such as a tiny monkey.

Even reputable naturalists were not averse from showing objects of doubtful authenticity to the curious, and the museum of the Tredescants boasted "two feathers of the Phoenix's tayle" as well as "a natural dragon above two inches long." There is a sequel to the story of the Hydra owned by Messrs. Dreyern and Hambel of Hamburg (page 211). It is told by W. J. Broderip, F.R.S., in his *Zoological Recreations*. "There can be little doubt," he writes, "that the publication of this figure [in Albertus Seba's book] must have added greatly to the fame of the dragon possessed by MM. Dreyern and Hambel. Still, no collector, even in that Tulipomaniacal country, seems to have screwed his courage to their price.

"One fine day, in walked a quiet foreigner to whom the precious specimen was shown with the half-concealed exultation of those who are wrapped in the comfortable certainty that they possess 'a gem' which is unique.

"The foreigner was Linnaeus, who was asked 'what he thought of that?'

"The great naturalist carefully examined the dragon, and appeared to the surrounding circle to be lost in admiration — for the question was repeated. He declared that it *was* wonderful, very, and a most ingenious combination of snake-skins, teeth of weasels, claws of birds, etc. etc. etc.

"The owners were probably saved by their wrath and fond credulity from dying on the spot, and by their wholesome dread of a public sudden death, from executing summary vengeance on the acute Swede. Clinging, however, to the belief that their lion, their treasure, their time-honoured Hydra was genuine, Linnaeus was threatened with a prosecution for injuring their property; and it is said that he left Hamburg as soon as he could, to avoid their ire."

ROYAL BEASTS AND EARLY ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS

The Queen's Beasts

Three sets of those heraldic animals known as the royal beasts can be seen within the environs of London. Seventy-six of them are perched upon the roof of St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle; ten stand upon the bridge across the one-time moat at Hampton Court Palace; ten others can be seen at the foot of the Palm House Terrace in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. All are modern.

Heraldry began as a system of identification. The necessity for a distinctive banner bearing a recognizable device was never more obvious than during the Middle Ages, when military leaders were encased in armour. The closed helm concealed the face; the body entirely clad in armour was completely impersonal. And so it became necessary for those who led their followers into battle to make themselves conspicuous by carrying a painted shield and a surcoat over their armour embroidered with some easily recognized device by which their soldiers, then quite illiterate, could distinguish them. In this way armorial bearings came into use, and from these devices, at first simple and painted in bright colours, sprung the science of heraldry, which seems to have come into being about the middle of the twelfth century, developing rapidly under the dual stimulus of the Crusades and the tournament.

The "beast," which might be animal or bird, fish or reptile, was often set as a crest upon its master's helm or used as a "supporter" for his shield of arms. One of the first recorded examples of a royal "beast" was the stone lion set upon the gable of the King's Hall at Windsor Castle in 1237, during the reign of Henry III. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw a proliferation of beasts as badges, and their use was not confined to royalty. Nobles and knights alike were fond of adorning their manor houses with them, and to this day we

can see pairs of beasts set upon the gateposts of many an English country house.

The royal beasts were to be found mainly in the royal palaces but occasionally elsewhere. We know, for instance, that ten of them guarded the medieval bridge at Rochester, Kent. At Windsor they were very much in evidence, and during the sixteenth century a large number were placed on the pinnacles of St. George's Chapel. These were removed in 1682 on the advice of Sir Christopher Wren, after many of them had fallen through neglect and decay. The new ones, carved by Joseph Armitage,* were placed upon the pinnacles in 1925 when St. George's Chapel was restored under the direction of Sir Harold Brakspear.

At Hampton Court Palace also the royal beasts were to be seen in great numbers – on the gable ends, on the battlements of the Great Hall, in the gardens, and on the bridge over the moat. Sometimes the beasts stood alone, but frequently they were shown holding a shield or banner charged either with arms or a badge. Those on the bridge were placed there shortly after Henry VIII's marriage with Jane Seymour in 1536. There were twelve in all, six belonging to the king and six to the queen. Harry Corant of Kingston-on-Thames carved six of them – a bull, a greyhound, a dragon, a unicorn, a lion and a panther; Richard Ridge, also of Kingston, carved the remainder – a yale, a unicorn, a dragon, a lion, a greyhound, and a panther. The cost was twenty-six shillings apiece.

Henry's bridge, with its array of royal beasts, stood until about the year 1691, when during alterations to the palace William III had the moat filled in, and the parapets of the bridge with their beasts were thrown down. What remained of the bridge was covered with soil. In 1909 the moat was once more cleared and the main fabric of the bridge was found to be intact. But of Henry VIII's beasts, only a few

*There were fourteen different beasts, seven Lancastrian and seven Yorkist, which were repeated to make up the number.

fragments remained. However, records of the beasts were found in the old building accounts of the palace, and a new set was designed by E.E. Dorling, F.S.A., and modelled in the London studios of Messrs. Brindley and Farmer by George Wilson.

Owing to alterations to the front of the gatehouse of Hampton Court Palace carried out in 1773, place could be found for only ten beasts instead of the original twelve, and those not reinstated were one unicorn and one greyhound. Five were designed after the royal beasts of Henry VIII and five were copied from those of his queen, Jane Seymour.

The royal beasts at Hampton Court are arranged alternately, first a king's beast and then a queen's, beginning with the king's crowned "leopard" on the left-hand side as one approaches the bridge. Opposite to it stands the queen's unicorn, holding her quartered shield: there follow, from side to side, the first of Jane's panthers, the dragon of Henry VIII, the greyhound with the shield of England, the queen's lion, the yale, Clarence's bull, a second dragon, and the queen's second panther.

Britain's Royal Menagerie

The first royal menagerie in England to be recorded was at the manor of Woodstock, near Oxford, where Henry I had a collection of wild beasts. We read that three leopards*, were presented to Henry III at Woodstock by the emperor Frederick II in 1235, and from there were transferred to the Tower of London, thus beginning the custom of keeping wild animals under what was known as the Lion Tower. Incidentally, Frederick II was himself a keen naturalist who had his own menagerie – a collection of animals which he took around with him in his travels. In November, 1231, he visited Ravenna "with many animals unknown to Italy – elephants, dromedaries, camels, panthers, gerfalcons, lions, leopards, white falcons and bearded owls." In 1245 the monks of Santo-Zeno at Verona had to entertain not only the emperor, but also provide for an elephant, five leopards and twenty-four camels. The last named were used for transport and were even taken over the Alps.

But to return to England: another present sent to Henry III was a white bear, for the maintenance of which the Privy Purse allowed the sum of fourpence a day (equivalent to about ten shillings of today's money). Orders concerning this animal are still in existence. One, addressed to "the keeper of our white bear, lately sent us from Norway, and which is in our Tower of London," commands him to provide a muzzle and iron chain to hold the animal, and a long and strong cord to be attached to the bear "when fishing in the River Thames." Great excitement must have been caused in the vicinity of the Tower when the local inhabitants caught sight of a bear catching its food in the waters of the Thames.

In 1255 the king was presented with an elephant by King Louis of France, and the Governor of the Tower was told to

*Symbolic of the English king's coat-of-arms.

build a "house," forty feet long by twenty feet deep, at the site of the Lion Tower "for our elephant." Other animals were added during the reigns of Edward I, II, and III, and the sheriffs of London were ordered to provide for their maintenance. During the reign of Edward II the pay of the keeper of the animals was fixed at three-halfpence a day, but when Henry VI appointed one Robert Mansfield as "marshall of our hall" the salary was raised to sixpence a day, with a further sixpence a day for "every lion and leopard now being in his custody." During the short reign of Richard III, the Lieutenant of the Tower, Brackenbury, was not above accepting the office of keeper of the wild beasts, and when Henry VII appointed Tiptoft, Earl of Oxford, Constable of the Tower, he gave him also the separate charge of Keeper of the Lions.

Bear-baiting, with the wretched animal at bay among a circle of mastiffs, was an entertainment – if we may use the word, for so they considered it – greatly to the liking of all classes in Elizabethan and Jacobean days. It was reserved for James I to subject the lions of the Tower to this wanton cruelty. Together with the queen and Prince Henry, and four or five courtiers, he went to the Lion Tower and had three fierce mastiffs put into the cage of one of the most powerful lions. Two of the dogs engaged in this inglorious form of combat died of their wounds.

We are told also that "the Kinge caused three trap doores to bee made in the wall of the lyon's den, for the lyons to goe into their walke at the pleasure of the keeper, which walke shall bee maintayned and kept for an especiall place to baight the lyons with dogges, beares, bulles, bores, &c." On June 23, 1609, King James and his family again went to the Tower "to see a trial of the lyon's single valour against a great fierce beare, who had killed a child that was negligently left in the beare-house." Strange negligence indeed! But the lions could not be induced to fight, although several were tried, and all of them, very sensibly, "sought the next way

into their dennes, as soone as they espied the trap-doores open." A few days later the bear was baited to death on a stage, by the king's order, "and unto the mother of the murthered child was given twenty pounds, out of the money which the people gave to see the bear killed." Thus the king saved his own pocket by the contributions of an assembly whose tastes were as brutal as his own.

Lord Stanhope, in his *History of England*, tells us that in 1758 George II (then about seventy-five) was so badly stricken with gout that his life was despaired of, and Lord Chesterfield wrote: "It was generally thought that His Majesty would have died, and for a very good reason, for the oldest lion in the Tower – much about the king's age – died a fortnight ago! This extravagancy, I can assure you, was believed by many above the common people."

A tract published in 1774, called *An Historical Description of the Tower of London and its Curiosities*, gives an interesting account of the animals to be seen in the Tower menagerie at that time. "At your entrance," says the guidebook, "you are carried into a range of dens in the form of a half-moon, most of them inhabited by lions and lionesses of different ages and different countries.

"The first they show you is a young he-lion named Marco, which was presented to his Majesty [George III] by his royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland; he is still very savage, and no art of the keepers can tame him. This den was formerly occupied by a lioness who lived about forty years in the Tower, and bred several times. She was the oldest that ever was known here, tho' it is more than 500 years since these sort of beasts first began to be kept in this place."

One of the whelps of this lioness was called Nero, of whom an anonymous writer gives the following description: "When he was two years old he was indeed a very beautiful creature, and exceedingly well educated; upon my expressing a desire of visiting his lodgings, at a word speaking, he marched down

with great condescension from his upper into his lower apartment, and gave me the opportunity of entering his den; where having satisfied my curiosity in viewing his dining-room, kitchin, and bed-chamber, his manner of living, particular ceremonies in eating, drinking, &c., at my departure from thence he would fain have taken me by the hand, but our acquaintance being but slender, I declined accepting so great a mark of his friendship till I had known him better."

In the next den to Marco were a lion called Master Dunco and a fine young tigress called Miss Groggery, both presented to the king by Lord Anson. In the third den were Pompey and Dido, son and daughter respectively of the lately deceased Zara, a lioness brought from the Dey of Algiers as a present to the English king. The next cage contained Caesar, the widower of the lamented Zara, and likewise a present from the Dey of Algiers. In the last den of this yard lived Richard, a tiger presented to the king by the Earl of Northumberland. From here the visitor passed into the next yard, where he was shown a young lioness, Miss Fanny; a large wolf from Saxony; Hector the lion; Miss Jenny, a Bengal tigress; and Nero, the oldest lion in the Tower. Among the other animals to be seen were a young leopard named Sir Robert; Miss Lucy, a panther from Buenos Aires; Cleony, another lioness; and a capuchin monkey.

"There was formerly shown here," continues the guidebook, "a black bear brought from New York by captain Lee and presented to the Duke of York, who gave it to his Majesty. This creature was very docile, and would open the door of his den and do several other feats at the word of command; but he was not so droll and dexterous as the Maryland bear; for that creature would show you the humours of the beggars on Tower Hill, would make the side-steps in the Prussian exercise, and usually closed his entertainment with a fine boarding-school courtesy."

In another yard were to be seen an African lioness named

Helen; a Muscovy cat, a tigress from the Guinea coast named Miss Nancy; and "an Eagle of the Sun, taken in a French prize by Admiral Boscawen. This bird is supposed to soar the highest of all the feathered tribe, and is able to look steadfastly at the sun, even in the most refulgent splendour; whence it obtained the name by which that species of eagle is distinguished. Here you are also shown a brown eagle which was brought from Philadelphia by Captain Fitzroy."

The next cages held respectively a raccoon from the Guinea Coast and a tiger-cat from Bombay. Finally the visitor was shown "a large Hyena, a fierce animal, and is said to be endued with great subtlety. But the noise he makes alarms travellers, and gives them notice to avoid the danger. Yet to those who are unacquainted with them, this noise may have a contrary effect; for they so perfectly imitate the human voice, by a sort of moan and groan which they make, that a stranger might easily mistake it for the voice of a human creature in extreme torture."

"We cannot quit this subject," writes the author, "without lamenting the loss of a fine large ostrich which lately died here. . . . The vulgar error that the ostrich can digest iron has been long since exploded; for in the year 1569 the Morocco ambassador to the States General, among other rarities, having brought over to Holland an ostrich, as a present, it died at Amsterdam in a few days by swallowing iron nails which the populace threw to it, upon a presumption that it could digest them like other food; but the ostrich being opened, about eighty nails were found entire in its stomach."

In 1834 the royal menagerie was finally removed to Regent's Park, there to form the nucleus of the present Zoological Gardens, following the founding and incorporation by Royal Charter of the Zoological Society of London in 1829. The Lion Tower, in part rebuilt, was in existence up to the middle of the nineteenth century, though in a very "desolate condition," and was occupied until 1840 or thereabouts by the last

"bearward," or keeper of the bears, who was finally pensioned off. The present restaurant stands on its site.

An amusing sidelight on the erstwhile royal menagerie at the Tower is afforded by an invitation card to be found in a collection at the British Museum (1879). This reads:

TOWER OF LONDON
Please to Admit the Bearer and Friend
to view the
Annual Ceremony of

WASHING THE LIONS
on Wednesday, April 1st, 185?

N.B. *It is requested that no Gratuity will be given to the Attendants.*

Visitors admitted only at the White Gate
Percy B. Greville

This little joke (note the month and day) was apparently of long standing, for pasted next to the invitation card is the following extract from a newspaper of 1771: "Yesterday being April day, two men went to the Tower to see the annual ceremony of washing the lions. On enquiring what time they would be washed they were told by a waterman in about ten minutes; he, at the same time, advised them to have a boat, as they might see better on the water. They had no sooner got into the boat but the waterman pushed them off, without any oars, and being immediately surrounded by a number of watermen in their boats, were well splashed by them for about a quarter of an hour, to the great diversion of the spectators."

The Beginning of Zoological Gardens

There have been various reasons which led man to keep wild animals in captivity: the curiosity of scholars, the ostentation of monarchs, the pride of the animal-tamer in his craft, and also (especially in ancient times) the veneration accorded to certain animals. The earliest menageries were probably sacred ones. The religion of the ancient Egyptians embodied the cult of a number of animals, possibly animal totems which in the course of time were transformed into symbolic forms of their divinities. The cult of Apis, the bull of Memphis, is of very early date. The bull symbolized the sun, just as the cow, under the name of Hathor (later Isis) was the goddess of the moon and the symbol of everlasting night.

In addition to bull, cow, and serpent, which were venerated all over Egypt, a large number of other animals were the objects of worship in different localities — the hippopotamus at Papremis, the cat at Bubastis, the lion at Leontopolis and Heliopolis, and the ram at Thebes and at Sais. Thus it came about that animals were frequently housed and guarded within the temples. At Arsinoe the sacred crocodiles of Lake Moeris were so tame that they came, at a call, from one end of the lake to the other to accept the offerings of their devotees.

The Romans were great importers of exotic animals, mainly to grace the triumphs of their generals or to provide the circuses which took the mind of the Roman proletariat off their miseries. In the art of killing men and animals for amusement the Romans had no superiors and probably few equals, unless perhaps among the Asiatic rulers of their time. According to Suetonius, the emperor Titus staged for the dedication of the Colosseum a most lavish gladiatorial show, and a wild-beast hunt at which 5,000 beasts of various kinds died during a single day.

There are few records of collections of wild animals after the collapse of the Roman Empire, though it seems clear that even during the so-called "Dark Ages" savage animals were kept in castles in various parts of Europe. Charlemagne received in 797, at his request, from the Caliph of Bagdad, the famous Haroun-al-Raschid, an elephant and several monkeys. The elephant, a tame one, was called Abdul-Abas. It was landed at Pisa, in charge of a Jew named Isaac, and joined Charlemagne in Lombardy, whence it crossed the Alps with its new master. It was lodged in the palace at Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) for some thirteen years and eventually died at Lippeham in Germany. One of its tusks was made into an enormous hunting-horn,* still to be seen in the basilica at Aix-la-Chapelle. It is recorded that the sumptuous palace of Charlemagne in that city housed several exotic animals, including a lion and a Numidian bear.

In former days most of the European monarchs had travelling menageries which followed them on their journeys from castle to castle to heighten the royal prestige. Henry I, who founded the first royal menagerie in England (see page 242) sent many of the animals from his park at Woodstock over to Caen to take part in the triumphal procession which marked his conquest of Normandy from his brother, Duke Robert, at the battle of Tinchebrai.

Philippe VI, the first of the Valois kings of France, built in 1333 a "Hôtel des lions du Roi," the first menagerie housed near the Louvre, which lasted until the time of Charles V. Close to it was a large aviary filled with nightingales; this, however, was actually inside the palace. A little earlier, Charles V, while still the dauphin, constructed the Hôtel St. Pol, in the gardens of which was a small zoo. It was visited by King Wenceslas of Bohemia, who wanted especially to see the lions. Lions were a feature of all these early menageries, for — contrary to the tiger, the lion breeds successfully in Europe.

*Known as the hunting-horn of Roland.

Tigers are less adaptable to the climate and are less placid in a new environment.

In Italy, during the fifteenth century, menageries were looked upon as a necessary appointment of a court, and large collections were to be found at Rome, Naples, Ferrara, Milan, Florence, and other cities. "It belongs to the position of the great," wrote Matarazzo, "to keep horses, dogs, mules, falcons and other birds, court-jesters, singers, and foreign animals." In Rome the popes, having returned from Avignon at the beginning of the fifteenth century, followed the general trend in this respect. Alexander VI, a Spaniard with a bull on his coat-of-arms, revived the spectacle of bullfights.

Jacob Burckhardt writes, in his *Civilization of the Renaissance*: "The facility of transport from the southern and eastern harbours of the Mediterranean, and the mildness of the Italian climate, made it practicable to buy the largest animals of the south, or to accept them as presents from the Sultan. The cities and princes were especially anxious to keep live lions, even when the lion was not, as in Florence, the emblem of the State."

In Florence the lions had been plentiful ever since the eleventh century, and their mortality rate was taken as an omen of success or failure by rulers and people alike. The death of a lion caused universal sorrow, while the birth of lion cubs was a signal for rejoicing. Their fertility was taken as a sign of prosperity for the city. In addition to the lions, the Florentines also kept leopards, a special keeper being appointed to look after them.

With Pope Leo X, who was a Médici, the zoological collection at the Vatican reached its highest development. Lions and leopards were sent to him from Florence, bears from Hungary, and an elephant and a snow-leopard were brought to him by Tristão da Cunha, Ambassador of the King of Portugal, Manuel I, on the occasion of his election to the Papacy.

Leo X made his pontifical entry into Rome on March 12, 1514, accompanied by the elephant and its mahout. When it had reached the window of the Vatican in which sat the Pope and cardinals, the elephant stopped, on the order of the mahout, and knelt three times in honour of His Holiness. But then, irritated perhaps by the large crowd, the malicious animal, catching sight of a tub of water, promptly douched everybody, the Pope included.

Elephants were much sought after by kings and princes, their great size and strength being flattering to the monarch's own vanity. Alas! they were somewhat expensive luxuries, and when Queen Elizabeth I showed plainly that she was covetous of the elephant belonging to Henri IV of France, the *Vert-Galant* very gallantly bestowed it upon her, glad enough to be rid of an animal which ate him out of house and home.

Burckhardt stresses the expense occasioned by these private menageries. "Filippo Maria Visconti possessed not only horses which cost him each 500 or 1000 pieces of gold, and valuable English dogs, but a number of leopards brought from all parts of the East; the expense of his hunting-birds which were collected from the countries of Northern Europe, amounted to 3000 pieces of gold a month. King Emmanuel the Great of Portugal knew well what he was about when he presented Leo X with an elephant and a rhinoceros."

The prelates of the Roman Curia followed the example of their masters, and at the splendid fête given by Cardinal Pietro Riario at Rome in 1473 on the occasion of the visit of Leonora of Aragon, Orpheus was shown in a mythological pantomime charming the wild beasts while Bacchus and Ariadne were seated in chariots drawn by panthers.

Louis XI of France received several gifts of rare animals from his uncle Count René of Anjou and Provence, king of the Two Sicilies. Count René had one of the finest collections of animals to be seen in Europe, housed in his châteaux at

Angers and Aix. This was undoubtedly the largest menagerie in France before Louis XIV's reign. When the zoo at Angers was completed about 1450, it included a lion house, buildings for small mammals, enclosures for ruminants and ostriches, and a garden with ponds for water-birds. René was one of the first to send out collectors to Africa and the Near East in search of animals.

Until Vasco da Gama had discovered the Cape route to India, the Turks had almost a monopoly in the supply of exotic animals to Western Europe, and it was largely through them that Frederick II, king of Naples, built up his great collection of animals.

In 1654 Cardinal Mazarin began the construction of a menagerie at the château of Vincennes, near Paris, which was near the site of the present Lac de Saint Mandé. At first it was used only for domestic animals and birds, but wild beasts were added later, coming probably from the Tuileries, where there was a menagerie during the reign of Henri IV. The animals at Vincennes, like those in the Tower of London, served mainly to provide shows for an invited audience. This collection of animals remained there until the beginning of the eighteenth century. But by far the largest of the early zoological gardens established in France was that built from 1662 onwards by Louis XIV when he was enlarging and embellishing the great palace at Versailles.

In Germany, at Marienburg, a collection of animals was formed in the old castle at a very early date by the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order. In 1408 there were already within the castle precincts monkeys, bears, seals, walruses, a lion, and five aurochs (the "urus or German bison") four of which were a gift to the Order from Witold of Lithuania. The urus or aurochs, still alive in the time of Gesner, gradually became extinct, the last survivor dying in 1627.

It is probable that the city of Nuremberg possessed some kind of zoological garden during the time of the Burgraves,

for one of the gates in the ramparts of the town was known as the *Thiergärtnertor*. But the collecting of wild animals did not really develop in Germany until the seventeenth century, when the Grand Elector Frederick William (1620-88) built a *tiergarten* at Potsdam, which was later enlarged by Frederick I.

The most ancient menagerie in Austria seems to have been that of Ebersdorf, founded in 1552 by Maximilian II, eldest son of the emperor Ferdinand I. Among the more exotic animals which it contained were some hunting leopards and an elephant. This particular elephant took a ride of place in the great procession which accompanied Maximilian when he was crowned king of Hungary on May 7, 1552. It was still alive in 1574, when it was shown by the emperor to Henri III of France. To Maximilian also belonged the famous pelican whose story was related by Gesner (page 133).

During the next reign, that of Rudolf II, the zoo at Ebersdorf harboured some rare birds, including the first cassowary known to Europeans.* It had been brought from Bemba by the Dutch, and after it had been exhibited for some time at Amsterdam, it was bought by the Elector of Cologne, who presented it to the emperor. This menagerie disappeared at the beginning of the seventeenth century, being supplanted by that at Neugebäu, also founded by Maximilian II.

*The Flemish painter Roelandt Savery, who made several paintings of the now extinct dodo (see page 123), was employed at the Court of Rudolf II.

Bibliography

Aelianus, Claudius, *De Historia Animalium*, Lyons, 1562
Albertus Magnus, *De Animalibus*, Rome, 1478
Aldrovandi, Ulisse, *De Quadrupedibus Solidipedibus*, Bologna, 1616
Quadrupedum omnium bisulcorum Historia, Bologna, 1621
Historia Monstrorum, Bologna, 1642
Apollonius of Tyana, *The Golden Flowers*, London, 1657
Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, Venice, 1526
Parva Naturalia, Cologne, 1491
Bartholomaeus, Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, London, 1535
Belon, Pierre, *Histoire Naturelle des Poissons*, Paris, 1551
Bodin, Jean, *Theatrum Naturae*, Paris, 1596
Bossi, Luigi, *Dei Basilischi*, Milan, 1792
Broderip, W. J., *Zoological Recreations*, London, 1847
Browne, Sir Thomas, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, London, 1646
Buffon, Count, *Natural History* (trans. W. Smellie), London, 1812
Carrington, Richard, *Mermaids and Mastodons*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1957
Chester, Robert, *Love's Martyr*, London, 1611
Du Bartas, *Divine Weekes & Works* (trans. Sylvester), London, 1605-06
De Beauvais, Vincent, *Miroir de la Nature* (MS. St. Germain)
De Laval, Francois, *Voyages*, Paris, 1619
De Nyauld, J., *De la Lycanthropie naturelle*, Paris, 1615
De Thaun, Philippe, *Le Livre des Créatures*, (Cotton MSS. British Museum)
Farnesius, Octavius, *Quaestiones Definitae*, Parma, 1613
Gesner, Konrad, *Historia Animalium*, London, 1551-87
Gibson, J., *Monsters of the Sea*, London, 1887
Gould, C., *Mythical Monsters*, London, 1886
Hawkins, Thomas, *Book of the great Sea-dragons*, London, 1840
Herbert, Sir Thomas, *Some Yeares Travels into divers parts of Asia and Afrique*, London, 1638
Hesiod, *The Remains of Hesiod* (trans. C. A. Elton), London, 1812
Hulme, F. E., *Natural History Lore & Legend*, London, 1895
Ingersoll, E., *Birds in Legend, Fable and Folklore*, Longmans, London, 1923
James, M. R., *A Peterborough Psalter and Bestiary of the 14th century*, Roxburghe Club, London, 1921
Jennison, George, *Noah's Cargo*, A. & C. Black, London, 1928
Jordanus (Bishop of Columbum), *Description des Merveilles d'une partie de l'Asie*, Paris, 1839
Kircher, Athanasius, *Mundus Subterraneus*, 1665

Kirchmaier, C. G., *On the Basilisk*, Wittenberg, 1886

Lauchert F., *Geschichte des Physiologus*, Strassburg, 1889
Lewinsohn, R., *Animals, Men and Myths*, V. Gollancz, London, 1954
Ley, Willy, *The Lungfish and the Unicorn*, Hutchinson, London, 1948
Lobo, Jeronymo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, London, 1735
Loisel, G., *Histoire des Ménageries*, Paris, 1912

Magnus, Olaus, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, Basle, 1567
Mandeville, Sir John, *Travels* (Cotton Text), London, 1725
Marco Polo, *Travels* (Marsden, revised T. Wright), London, 1854
Marini, Andrea, *Discorso dell' Alicorno*, Venice, 1566
Maury, L., *Croyances et Légendes*, Paris, 1896

Neckham, Alexander, *De Naturis Rerum* (ed. T. Wright), London, 1858

Pliny (Plinius Secundus, Caius), *The Historie of the World*, (trans. Philemon Holland), London, 1601
Phipson, E., *Animal Lore in Shakespeare's Time*, London, 1883
Pontoppidan, Erich (Bishop of Bergen), *The Natural History of Norway*, London, 1755
Porta, G. B. della, *Natural Magick*, London, 1658

Robin, P. A., *Animal Lore in English Literature*, John Murray, London, 1932
Rondelet, Guillaume, *Libri de Piscibus Marinis*, Lyons, 1554-55
Ross. Alexander, *Arcana Microcosmi*, London, 1651

Seager, H. W., *Natural History in Shakespeare's Time*, London, 1896
Septimus, Sereaus, *Fragmenta Opusculorum Ruralium* (Lemaire's "Biblia Classica," Vol. 134), Paris, 1819-26
Shepard, Odell, *Lore of the Unicorn*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1930
Smith, G. Elliot, *Evolution of the Dragon*, University Press, Manchester, 1919
Solinus, Julius, *Polyhistoria* (trans. Golding), London, 1587
Steele, R., *Mediaeval Lore*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1907

Thevet, A., *Cosmographie Universelle*, Paris, 1575
Topsell, E., *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes*, London, 1607

Watkins, Rev. M. G., *Gleanings from the Natural History of the Ancients*, London, 1885
White, T. H., *The Book of Beasts*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1954
Worm, Ole, *Antiquitates Danicae*, London, 1643-51