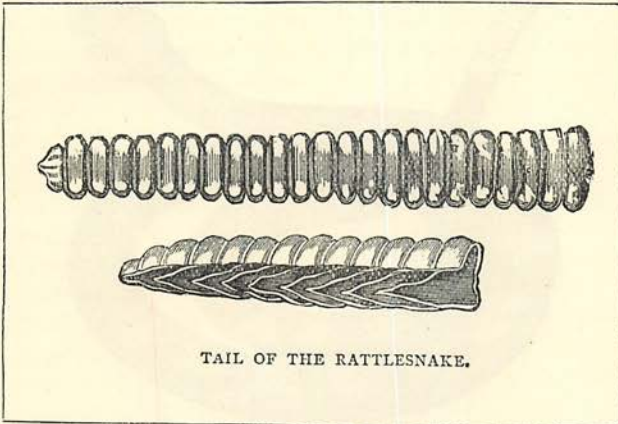


RATTLESNAKES AND VIPERS.

FROM New York to Savannah, and beyond, and from the borders of the sea, far to the west and north-west (says Palizot-Beauvois, in his work on serpents), rattlesnakes, to the number of three distinct species, are found in abundance. "That to which Linnæus has given the name of *Horridus*, so dangerous in the south, of which the effects resulting from the bite are so exaggerated in the north, and which is known to be so susceptible of

rattlesnake, without its displaying the least desire to seize me. I have always been warned of its presence by the noise of its rattle; and while I have retreated without any great haste, it has never stirred from the spot, never changed its posture, but has given me time to cut a stick for the purpose of despatching it.

Dangerous as its bite is supposed to be, and which in fact it is, during certain months of the year, and especially if the tooth pierces a blood-vessel, still, when the reptile has retired to its winter abode, it may be handled without danger; not



TAIL OF THE RATTLESNAKE.

being rendered torpid by cold and frost, presents to the unprejudiced observer much to interest him, and peculiarities in direct contradiction to the fables attributed to it.

Frightful as this reptile appears to the eyes of prejudice, certain it is, that few animals are more peaceful, and less inclined to do mischief, than the rattlesnake. It never attacks animals on which it does not feed; and if it be neither alarmed nor molested, it never attempts to bite. I have often traversed a path, at the distance of a foot from a

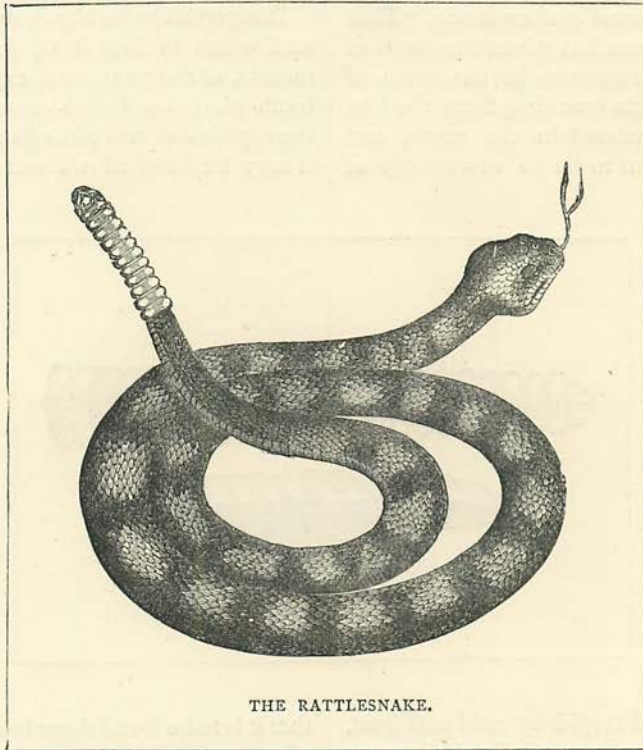
that it is to be found there in a state always of torpor and inactivity, for it is only in the middle of winter, and during hard frosts, that we find these animals intertwined together in ball-like masses, and totally torpid.

On the approach of spring, the season in which, if I may so express it, serpents re-appear among the number of living beings, the Boiquira begins to move: at first, as if to rouse itself from its torpor, and try its strength, it crawls slowly among the roots of trees; by degrees, it becomes more animated, and the more

so as the time of its liberation approaches. Sometimes, a very fine day temporarily hastens this epoch, and they creep forth from their holes, stretch themselves, and bask in the sun; but still they will not bite. Burdened with their old skin, which they are waiting for the time to throw off, their sight, as in all other serpents, is very defective; and they seem to me as if they are labouring under some malady,

In summer, this reptile is more dangerous; but, as I have already said, it is never until after being alarmed, or touched, or struck; it then, indeed, instantly coils itself round, and warns by its hissing, and the rapid rattling of its tail, of its angry desire for vengeance. Then, woe to the man or animal within its reach.

Its bite, from the moment it emerges



THE RATTLESNAKE.

which takes away both the desire and the power to injure.

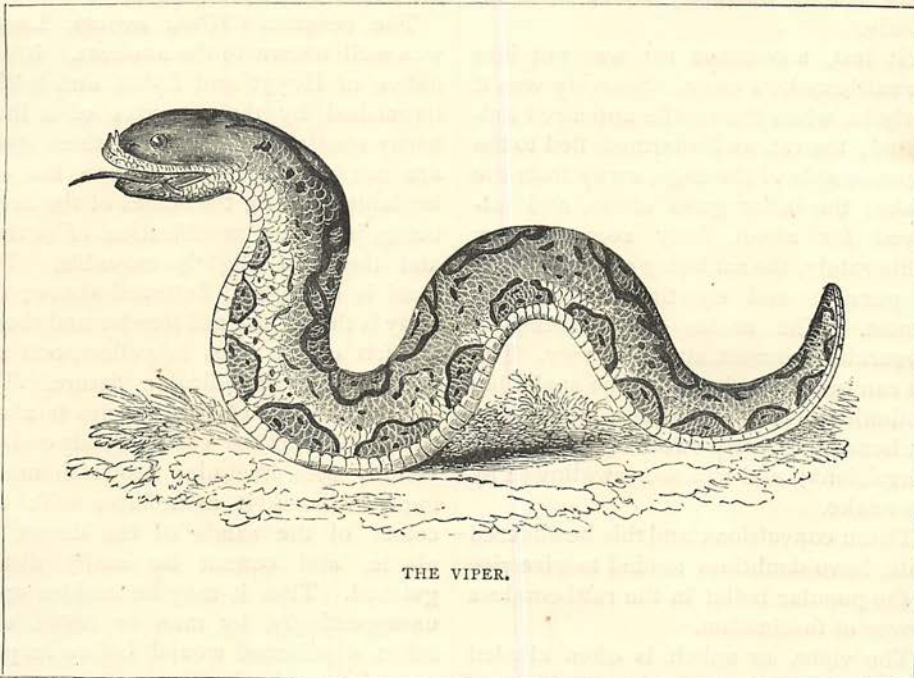
In the month of February, 1797, we went with Mr. Pence, of Philadelphia, to hunt for rattlesnakes, which are numerous in New Jersey; we caught nine, and almost all with the hand, in the space of two hours. Although they had already begun to sound their rattles, not one of them to bite.

from its retreat, till August, does not necessarily produce fatal results. It has been remarked, and the observation has not escaped the Indians, that from the month of August, to the time when it is about to retire to its winter quarters, the period in which it takes the most food, it becomes terrible, and its bite mortal.

We know that serpents in general retire, on the approach of winter, accord-

ing to the nature of the ground, and the temperature of the places they tenant, either under large stones, or into holes which other animals have burrowed. The Boiquira gives preference to places in the vicinity of water. We have dug up many of their holes on the borders of the river Maurice. They were all tortuous, and led to a sort of chamber, distant from the entrance six or eight feet; and there we have found them in

creeping among the roots of the trees, immediately beneath the moss, and on an oozy ground, over which flowed running water not affected by the frost. Here I would make a passing remark, that this fact may be turned to account by persons employed in agriculture, or gardening; this moss might be employed for the preservation of delicate plants, liable to be killed by the severity of winter.



balls, and twined together. Our guide led us, on one occasion, into a marshy place, covered with a prodigious quantity of the 'sphagnum palustre,' a kind of moss, of which the stems are from six to twelve inches high. Having removed some of this moss, of which the top was frozen (the frost being so severe that it penetrated the naked ground, to the depth of twelve or fourteen inches), we perceived many rattlesnakes, slowly

Numerous experiments prove that the rattlesnake eats indifferently all kinds of dead birds he meets with; and that he employs no supernatural means, as asserted, to seize his victims. He does not, however, eat frogs, to which the black snake is so partial."

An oriole was introduced into the cage of the rattlesnake, and there remained for two days, during which time the reptile never attempted to bite it. The

bird betrayed no fear, and experienced no ill effects from the air of the cage. A dead bird being introduced, was, however, eaten; while the living oriole was fluttering about untouched.

A cardinal grosbeck was then put in, and this bird, so far from avoiding the reptile, pecked at ease about the cage, picked up the seeds, and even hopped upon the snake's back; but it retreated when it heard the noise of the rattle. Frogs, both living and dead, were presented, but it would not touch them; the black snake, however, seized them instantly.

At last, a common rat was put into the rattlesnake's cage. Scarcely was it fairly in, when the reptile appeared animated; the rat, as if alarmed, fled to the opposite side of the cage, away from the snake; the latter gave chase, and followed for about forty seconds very deliberately, the rat being eager to avoid its pursuer, and exerting itself to the utmost. The snake then, seizing a favourable moment, struck its prey. The rat ran bewildered about; the snake lay motionless. At the end of a minute, the rat became greatly swollen, and died in convulsions; and was soon swallowed by the snake.

These convulsions, and this bewildered state, have doubtless tended to give rise to the popular belief in the rattlesnake's power of fascination.

The viper, or apheh, is often alluded to in the Scriptures; as an emblem of

malignity and mischief; this viper is not, however, our common species, but one much more dangerous; perhaps, the *Vipera Aegyptica*, Latreille, which he considers to be the aspic of the ancients; or, perhaps, a large species, the *Vipera Euphratica*, which is extremely venomous, and found in the country bordering the Euphrates.

In this viper, and in the *Vipera elegans*, and their allies, there is a deep pit behind the aperture of the nostrils; as is also the case in the rattlesnakes, and in the genus *Trigonocephalus*.

The cerastes (*Vipera cerastes*, Laur.) was well known to the ancients. It is a native of Egypt and Lybia, and is distinguished by the presence of a little horny spur above each eye; these spurs are not attached to the bone, but are implanted among the scales of the head, being, indeed, a modification of scales; and they are slightly movable. The head is large, and flattened above; the body is thick; the tail slender and short; the iris of the eyes is yellow, and the pupil is a perpendicular fissure. The general length of this species is about two feet; and the colour sandy red, or yellow, with irregular brownish markings; whence it assimilates with the colour of the sands of the desert, its abode, and cannot be easily distinguished. Thus it may be trodden upon unsuspectingly, by man or cattle, and inflict a poisoned wound, before its presence is perceived.

