

OLD NATURAL HISTORY NOTIONS.

WHEN Sir Walter Scott said he could believe everything of a dog but that he could talk, the great minstrel gave utterance to a sentiment in which few of us do not share. A disposition, however, to estimate highly the intelligence and capacity of the lower orders of the animal creation was an especial attribute of the earlier writers on natural history. In none of these is it more conspicuous than in the excellent Bishop of Bergen, Dr. Eric Pontoppidan, whose "Natural History of Norway" is one of the most fascinating works it has ever been our hap to meet with.

Reynard, from time immemorial, has been the subject of popular reviling: his base cunning, his cowardice, his faithlessness, his inveterate dishonesty, cruelty, and selfishness, have been celebrated in almost every tongue, and in an infinity of ways. But, in treating of his habits, the reverend Northern divine, not extenuating his undoubted faults, dwells chiefly on that marvellous aptitude of his for meeting serious emergencies and supplying pressing wants. For example, he tells us that when a fox desires to rid himself of a party of fillibustering fleas who have quartered themselves in his fur, he takes a bunch of moss or straw in his mouth and goes backwards into the water, slowly wading deeper and deeper. The fleas have thus ample time to ascend to the only dry regions of his person, to wit, his head and the upper part of his neck. He then gathers them on to the moss or straw, drops them into the water, and, "free from all incumbrance" himself, paddles back to dry land. Admire, also, his piscatorial skill and ichthyological knowledge. He likes crabs—we have the bishop's authority for the assertion—and knows *they* like things of a hairy substance; so when he goes fishing for them he just drops his "brush" in the water, and when they seize the tempting bait he drags them ashore as captives in his rear. Then does the bishop tell us of the krage, a bird which, though it feeds on carrion, has olfactory nerves so marvellously acute, that it can smell gunpowder at a vast distance, and is thus able to render essential service to its feathered brethren by warning them of

the sportsman's approach. Indeed, it is said to follow him with the benevolent purpose of giving this warning. When Franciscus Sanctius, the great grammarian, denied that the nightingale had a tongue—though, by the way, nightingales' tongues were understood to have been a favourite *bonne bouche* of Heliogabalus—could he have paid a higher tribute to the capacity of the songster capable of emitting such enchanting strains, though destitute of so useful an organ?

Take, again, the much-maligned pig, whose very name has long been a synonyme for a gluttonous and thoroughly debased nature. Juvenal and Varro—the first, evidently an ill-tempered, snarling sort of fellow—declare the sole objects of the pig's creation—its being's end and aim—to have been to contribute to the gratification of man's gustatory propensities; whilst Martial, in a more generous spirit, remarks, in its "condign praise," that though its fare had been acorns, and its days passed amongst savage boars, it was an excellent beast after all—on the dinner table. Pliny, after eulogising its flesh as an article of food, observing that, whilst the flesh of other animals had each a flavour peculiar to it, hog's flesh had no less than fifty flavours of its own—a rare merit, we submit—remarks—"Animals of this kind delight in rolling in the mud. The tail is curled, and it has also been observed that those whose tails curl to the right are a more acceptable offering to the gods than those whose caudal inclination is to the left." Having no personal acquaintance with the inhabitants of Olympus, we can affirm nothing as to the latter proposition; but, as to the first, it should be remembered that, in his wild state, the hog "lives cleanly like a nobleman." It has been his introduction into civilised life that has made him a dirty wretch. The invention of the sty was none of his; he owes it to mankind, so boastful of their refinement. The pig, as Pliny testifies, is remarkably delicate in point of diet. He suffers from improper food quite as much as the most dainty lady in Belgrave-square. Beech-mast, according to one opinion, is the viand the most befitting him,

rendering his flesh delicate and tender, although others believe it makes him coarse and gross. Fed on the acorns of the holm oak or the cork tree, his rotundity of shape disappears, his complexion becomes pallid, and his whole frame is meagre and lumpish. When Miss Seward described to Dr. Johnson the learned pig she had seen at Nottingham, and its feats, "Well," he said, "then the pigs are a race unjustly calumniated. *Pig*, it seems, has not been wanting to *man*, but *man* to *pig*. We do not allow time for his education; we kill him at a year old."

If the pig has been stigmatised for equalor, the bear has been censured for his uncouthness; yet are we told on excellent authority that, should a bear, when swimming, overtake a boat, he will enter it if he can, and sit at the stern peacefully and quietly, as a well-mannered beast should do. In short, if you treat him as a gentleman, he will behave himself as such.

Islip and Blechinton, an old naturalist records, are both in Oxfordshire, and are but two miles apart; yet the observation has been made, that whenever a snake or adder was carried from Blechinton, where such reptiles abounded, to Islip, where they were scarce, it forthwith pined away and died, a circumstance as affecting as that Mrs. Somerville relates of the lenings, or Lapland marmots. These migrate in large bands, every twenty-five years, to the Western Ocean, which they voluntarily enter and are drowned, thereby averting the evils incident to a state of things in which population is in excess of food. The stork, too, according to some German writers, has formed a nice estimate of his duties, and never remains in a city in which their dues are withheld from the clergy.

Instances beyond number of the intelligence belonging to the humbler classes of animals might here be cited, but one of the most singular is that of the bear, who, directly he finds himself indisposed, hastens to seek the only remedy for his disorder—an agreeable repast off human flesh. Whatever we may think to the contrary, this animal, who, the Norwegian peasants declare, has the wit of two and the strength of seven men, is really a "delicate monster" after all, and has his ailments and maladies like other folks. In the spring, his paws, which he has

been sucking all the winter for his sustenance, are so tender and soft, that he hobbles rather than walks, and should he, by chance, step on a stone, no gouty alderman suffers more than he. In Northern Europe there is a sort of weasel who is as great a gourmand as was the late Sir William Curtis. He makes a principle of never quitting a carcass until he has picked every bone quite clean, and so, when he finds he has reached a state of repletion, he hastens forcibly to insert his body between two trees growing in close proximity to each other. The compression he thus insures enables him to eject the food he has already swallowed, and this result obtained, he hastens back to his banquet, repeating the process till nought is left him to consume. The lynx is a beast of less voracity. He kills much, but eats little; his feasts are very moderate during the waxing of the moon—when it wanes he indulges himself more liberally.

We may think strange the practice which obtained in the time of Albertus Magnus of physicking hawks, when sick, with pills enveloped in honey and pepper. But our surprise will diminish when we learn that, in Norway, should a cow chance to break her leg, the disaster is immediately repaired by giving her cow's bones to gnaw, which she does with all the dexterity of a dog. That stately beast, the elk, unknown to these islands for many a long year, is understood to be peculiarly subject to cramp and epileptic fits, and the way he repels their assaults is by stretching his hind foot to his head, and vigorously scratching his ear. So potent is he in overcoming these disorders, that rings, made from his cloven hoofs, are thought to be preservatives against them, just as the dried flesh of the greedy wolf, when taken in the form of a powder, is considered to stimulate a jaded appetite. A Middle Age writer on these subjects says that, if the heart of a crow or a bat be laid on a person, it will prevent his sleeping, and so, also, will the head of a bat, powdered and bound on the right arm. On the other hand, should it be laid on the stomach of a sleeping person, he will sleep on until it be removed. Of course, there is no doubt of the fact—for is it not stated in a learned book full of dark sayings and incomprehensible jargon?—but the reason thereof is not

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easy of discovery. Nor can we well understand why such virtue was formerly ascribed to the tincture of coral as a therapeutical remedy, and why it should be thought that coral beads, hung round the neck, were prophylactics against apoplexy, the plague, and a multitude of other diseases. Enough to know that to this belief coral necklaces were indebted for their origin.

Mr. Beckford, of "Vathek" celebrity, was a man brimful of humour, and nothing delighted him more than, as the Irish say, "poking his fun" at other people. After observing he thought it "a little hard" that through the selfishness of the Dutch, "frogs were excluded from the magistracy of their country," he continues—"Very slight authority would persuade me that there was a period when Holland was all water, and the ancestors of the present inhabitants fish. A certain *oysterishness* of eye and flabbiness of complexion are almost proof sufficient of their aquatic descent; and pray tell me for what purpose are such galligaskins as the Dutch burden themselves with contrived but to tuck up a flouncing tail, and thus cloak the deformity of a dolphin-like termination?"

Mr. Beckford had, probably, no converse with the writings of some of our earlier natural historians, or he would have found a more suitable subject for his bad nage. He would have learnt from them that in nature metamorphoses occur quite as extraordinary as that he describes in his mirth. A wise people of antiquity, the Egyptians, symbolised the idea of deformity by the figure of a bear—that animal being known to change its sex regularly every year.

In Scandinavia, the cuckoo, we are told, in his second year becomes a kite. In his original state he is accounted a lazy bird, for, instead of catering for himself, as most respectable birds do, he is indebted for his food to a faithful friend and attendant—a diminutive specimen of his own kind—who waits on him for the purpose. Directly on his conversion into a kite, he reveals his change of condition by incontinently gobbling up his benefactor, and earning for himself the title, which is everywhere given to him, of the ungrateful bird.

In the vegetable world these transmigrations are also not uncommon. There are places in the North where, in wet years, barley degenerates into oats; whilst, in favourable seasons, good oats become transformed into barley. A German writer, formerly of great repute, positively contends that, under certain circumstances—which he indicates—wheat sinks into the degraded condition of tares; and that a nutmeg from the Moluccas, when planted in Europe, grows up a walnut-tree. It was seriously maintained, in a thesis by another erudite German, that geese belonged to the vegetable, and not the animal, kingdom, and actually grew upon trees. Whatever were his reasonings, they had cogency sufficient to convince the doctors of the Sorbonne, who, accordingly, issued a decree declaring these birds to be no birds, and permitting their use as articles of food in Lent. It was in a spirit of similar enlightenment that another learned faculty, of the same school of divinity, authoritatively pronounced the *tail* of the beaver to be fish, and the *body* to be flesh.



Beavers.