

## SOME QUEER DISHES.

BY FANNIE ROPER FEUDGE.

PEOPLE often laugh at the French for eating frogs, and at the Chinese for liking young puppies; but neither of these tastes can be compared with some of the quaint dishes I have met in foreign lands.

For instance, what would you say to dining on elephant's heart, baked, and garnished with a sauce made of monkey brains? Queer enough, you will think; but it is dainty fare, nevertheless; and steaks cut from the loin or breast of a young monkey are luscious beyond description. Even the huge, ungainly feet of the elephant, when baked between bricks, in a hole under ground, furnish a repast fit for a king. And very few besides kings and their families, with occasionally a favored guest, ever get an opportunity of tasting such a delicacy as elephant-meat in any form; for in the East elephants are regarded as truly royal beasts, and, living or dead, they are quite beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. All along the Malabar coast, and in very many of the Malayan islands, as well as in Burmah and China, "pig-rats" and "coffee-rats" are abundant, and in high repute among epicures. They are not the ordinary "house-rat," nor the Norwegian "wharf-rat" known among us; but an entirely different species, growing often to a length of nearly two feet, and weighing from two to three pounds. They look very like our hares and squirrels, are said to be cleanly, grain-eating animals, and furnish, either boiled or curried, a most luscious repast.

But for the name, I would have gladly feasted on the tender, juicy meat, that looked sweet as a nut, and sent forth a very appetizing aroma. But the thought of eating rat-meat always took away my desire for food; though I have been assured by kings and princes who had all manner of dainties at command, that it was impossible for any one to conceive of a more delicate or dainty tit-bit than the breast of a broiled rat!

When dining, on one occasion, at the palace of an Oriental Prince, after tasting of sundry unknown dishes, I chanced upon one that specially suited my palate, and partook of it quite freely. I presently inquired the ingredients of the savory *fri-cassée* that had so pleased me, and learned, to my unutterable horror, that I had been eating a preparation of ants' eggs! I lost my relish for the meal, but I learned the wisdom of not asking, in

future, the name of any dish I happened to fancy at Oriental tables. Among the Hottentots and some other African tribes, the *termites*, or white ants, are esteemed both palatable and nutritious. They boil them, eat them raw, or toast them as we do coffee. The last mode is considered the best, and, thus prepared, they are said to resemble sugared cream or sweet almonds.

Dr. Livingstone mentions a Bayeiye chief who visited him and remained to dinner. The Doctor, after regaling his guest with preserved apricots and other dainties,—a fresh installment just received from the coast,—inquired of him whether the African country could boast any better food. "Only white ants," was the prompt reply. "Nothing is *quite* so good as white ants."

Palm-grubs and various kinds of slugs are eaten nearly all over the East; as are bees, grasshoppers, and even spiders, in some localities,—not because other food is scarce, but because people like those queer-looking and queer-tasting dishes.

The Greeks of the olden time used to eat grasshoppers; and the Chinese occasionally convert into dainty dishes for their tables, the chrysalis of the silk-worm. The negroes of several of the West India Islands eat butterflies and moths. They catch the insects in large quantities by means of nets, remove the wings, then dry and smoke the bodies, and finally, after beating them to a fine powder, pack away in jars to be used as a relish during the Winter.

We read in the Bible, that the food of John the Baptist was "locusts and wild honey." A great deal of pains has been taken by commentators to prove that it was not what we call locusts, but the fruit of the wild carob-tree, that John ate with the honey that he found in the wilderness where he lived.

But I do not think that any one who has traveled in Arabia, or found rest and shelter in an Arab's tent, and been a guest at his hospitable board, would thus judge of what the Bible means by "locusts." In Turkey, Persia, Arabia, and all that region of country, locusts—genuine, *bonâ-fide* locusts—have been eaten from remote antiquity; and to this day, they form an important item of the food used by the common people. The Bedouins collect them in immense quantities, and, after a partial drying, pack them in sacks. Then at their convenience, when the season for collecting

is over, they steam the insects in close vessels over a hot fire, winnow them in broad baskets to remove the legs and wings, and then pulverize between flat stones. When wanted for food, they are only moistened with a little water, just as the Arabs do in preparing their date-flour, and then the repast is all ready.

The Turks eat locusts in the same way, and by very many other Orientals they are regarded as the choicest of dainties.

The Moors boil or fry them, seasoning with salt, pepper, and vinegar; and they pronounce them even superior to quails and pigeons. The Hotentots make from the eggs a delicious soup; they also roast the locusts over a slow fire, and eat them as we do caramels or bon-bons. Dr. Livingstone says he used them at first from necessity, when deprived of all other food; "but, strange to say, grew daily more fond of them, and at last preferred them to shrimps or oysters."

In Peter Martyn's account of the voyages of Columbus, he alludes to the disgust of the Spaniards when urged by the Indians at St. Domingo to partake of their boasted delicacy, the guano. The Spaniards mistook the odd-looking reptile for a species of serpent, and hence rejected it with horror; but, like many a tourist in the strange, far-off lands of the East, they lived to change their minds. Martyn says quaintly:

"These serpentes are lyke unto crocodiles save in bygness. Unto that daye, none of our men durste adventure to taste them, by reason of theyre horrible deformitie and loathsomeness. Yet the Adalantado, being entyced by the pleasantness of the King's sister, Anacaona, determined to taste the serpentes. But when he felt the flesh thereof to be so delycate to his tongue, he fel to amain, without all feare. The which thyng his companions seeing, were not behynd hym in greadynesse, insomuche that they had now none other talke than of the sweetnesse of these serpentes, which they affirme to be of more pleasant taste than eyther our phesantes or partriches."

Of the delicious birds'-nest soup eaten in China, everybody has heard, but everybody has not been privileged to partake of that most delectable of all Oriental dainties. The nests are formed of the secretions of a species of swallow, called by naturalists *Hirundo esculenta*, because their dwellings are eaten. These birds are common on most of the islands of the Indian Archipelagoes, but their head-quarters are Sumatra, Java, and Borneo. They build their nests over shelving rocks, in places that would seem to be inaccessible to man.

But such is the demand for this dainty, and so high its market value, that hundreds of men

spend their whole lives in the perilous work of collecting the nests from deep caverns, by torch-light, and overhanging rocks, frightful cliffs, and precipices, such as make the head grow dizzy even to think of, and whence the slightest loss of footing must prove fatal to the adventurer. Multitudes of others are constantly employed in separating with delicate tweezers the feathers and other impurities from the gelatinous portion of the nests, and in washing and drying them in preparation for the market.

The bird makes its first nest of a gelatine produced from its own body, without any foreign admixture; but when deprived of this, being unable to secrete a sufficient quantity of the gluten for another, he mixes in the second a considerable portion of sticks, feathers, and dried grass, thus rendering the nest far less desirable for edible purposes.

Again, however, the rapacious hunter, lying in wait for his prey, turns out the homeless bird, and bears off the prize; and when, for the third time, the little architect rears his home, it is composed almost entirely of stubble, with the slightest possible admixture of gelatine.

This last nest being comparatively worthless for food, the poor little builder is ordinarily allowed to retain possession, and rears its family without farther molestation. The nests are about the size of a small tea-cup, and an eighth of an inch in thickness, weighing scarcely half an ounce each.

The first nests collected are of a pure creamy whiteness, and bring readily twice their own weight in silver dollars. These require little cleansing, only to be dried and packed; but the second gathering must be carefully picked over, and thoroughly washed. The nests thus losing their original lusciousness, their market value is proportionately diminished, and they sell for about eighteen or twenty dollars per pound,—the poorest as low as six or eight. Even the *third* nests are occasionally taken, but they bring a mere trifle, and are only used by those whose epicurean tastes exceed the length of their purses.

Whole streets in Canton are occupied by the preparers and venders of birds'-nests; and about a million and a-half of dollars are annually expended by the Chinese in the purchase of this dainty, which, when rendered into soup or jelly, the Celestial regards as the most delectable of food.

The nests are first soaked in water, then boiled to a jelly, and finally, swimming in a rich gravy composed of the expressed juice of the cocoanut, with various spices and condiments, they are placed on the table,—a rich, pulpy mass, and truly delicious.