

BY A. M. AVENELL.

IN these days of sensational trials and extraordinary occurrences, it is strange to look back into the Middle Ages and note the peculiar developments of superstition and fancy in those remote times. Not only were the punishments given cruel and uncouth—the crimes themselves were often horrible beyond belief, and in most cases the witnesses had nearly as hard a time of it as the accused.

But the horror and cruelty of the judgments of the Middle Ages were sometimes lightened by scenes which seem irresistibly comical to us now, though at the time they were enacted in perfect good faith. Strange criminals sometimes appeared at a mediæval Bar, either in person or by proxy, to receive the punishment of their crimes. In France alone there

were no fewer than ninety-two trials of animals recorded between the years 1120 and 1740—the last sufferer being an unfortunate cow.

The delinquents were not only those animals who had committed direct assaults upon humanity. There is a kind of justice in bringing a bull to trial for goring a man

to death, or a dog for killing a little child. But the mediæval intellect went further, and saw malicious intent in any annoyance of men by beasts and insects. There was a regular course of procedure to be followed, and all things were done decently and in order.

For example, in cases where a district was overrun by rats, mice, locusts, fleas, or other pests, the ordinary course was to appoint an advocate to plead for the accused creatures, and then to summon them publicly three times



"AN UNFORTUNATE COW."

to appear before the Court. If they did not appear at the third summons, the case was tried in their absence; and if their advocate could not make a good defence for them, they were ordered to leave the country before a certain date, under penalty of exorcism. This penalty was generally enforced, although, astonishing to relate, the creatures often seemed to become even more abundant and destructive than ever after being exorcised. This, however, was always put down to the power of Satan, and did not shake the faith of the people in the least.

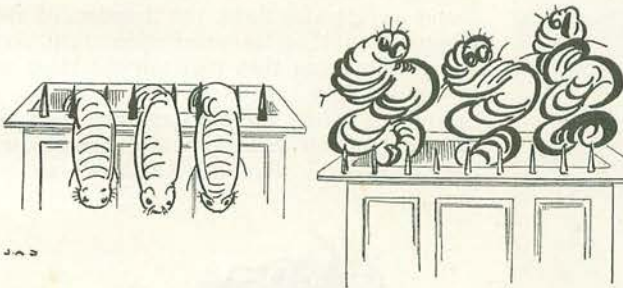
There is, however, an account of some leeches who were tried at Lausanne, in the



"THE FLEA CHARGED WITH MALICIOUS INTENT."

caught and brought into court to hear the sentence, which was the usual order to leave the place within three days under pain of exorcism. Whether the leeches did not quite understand, or whether they were contumacious, does not transpire; but it is placed upon record that they failed to depart within the prescribed limit, were exorcised with all due ceremony, and immediately commenced to die off day after day, so that in a little time the whole race was exterminated.

A very curious trial of rats is recorded to have taken place at Autun in the fifteenth century. M. Chassensée, an advocate of the place, was appointed to plead for them; and very well he did it, actually getting his clients off! They were accused of appearing in great numbers and annoying the townspeople, and were summoned to appear before the Court. The first plea of M. Chassensée was that the rats were unable to attend upon the day named because all of them had been summoned to appear, and as some of them were very young and others sick and infirm, they required a longer time to prepare for their journey. The Court admitted the plea,



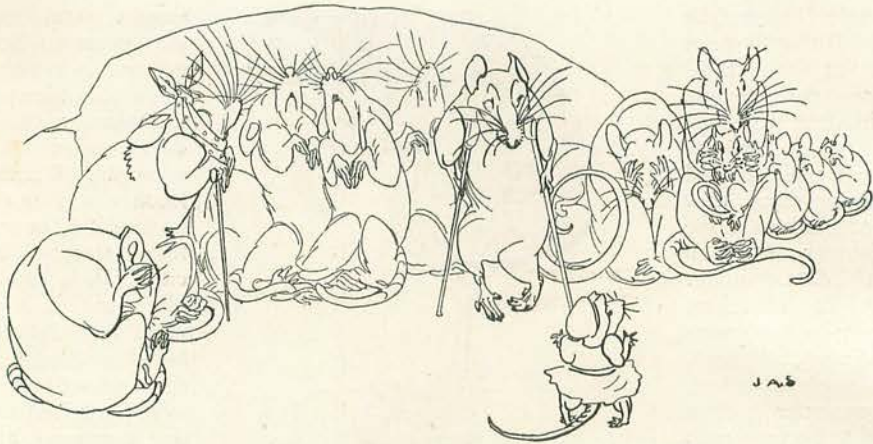
"THE LEECHES IN THE DOCK—SENTENCED!"

year 1451, who behaved in a much more satisfactory manner. They had been found guilty of infesting the country and annoying the inhabitants, and a few of them were

young and others sick and infirm, they required a longer time to prepare for their journey. The Court admitted the plea,



"THEY ANNOYED THE TOWNSPEOPLE."



"SOME OF THEM WERE VERY YOUNG AND OTHERS SICK AND INFIRM."

and granted an extension of time. Still the rats did not appear, and their advocate brought forward another plea. He declared that his clients were ready and willing to come and were only restrained by bodily fear. They considered the Court was bound to protect them as they came by its order, and therefore requested that, before they appeared in the open streets, the cats of the neighbourhood should be bound over to keep the peace. The Court acknowledged the justice of the request; but the townspeople, who were the plaintiffs in the action, refused to be responsible for their cats. The whole thing reads like some child's story; but the records of Autun bear witness to the truth of it. The cause was determined in favour of the rats, as they were willing to appear; and we can only suppose that they were allowed henceforth to pursue their depredations unmolested. It is not mentioned what reward they gave to their advocate, who certainly deserved well of them.



"INTO THE SEA."

marching away in troops in the broad light of day! Some of them committed suicide, and plunged by hundreds at a time into the sea, sooner than remain to face the exorcism of the Church. It is almost a pity that the faith of the nineteenth century will not allow a trial of the ancient methods upon the rabbits in Australia. No advocate would be found to plead for them, the thunders of the Church would be launched upon them, and always supposing that they saw the thing in its true light, they would immediately commence dying, like the Lausanne leeches, or would march in a body to the coast, and cast themselves, like the Gadarene swine, into the sea.



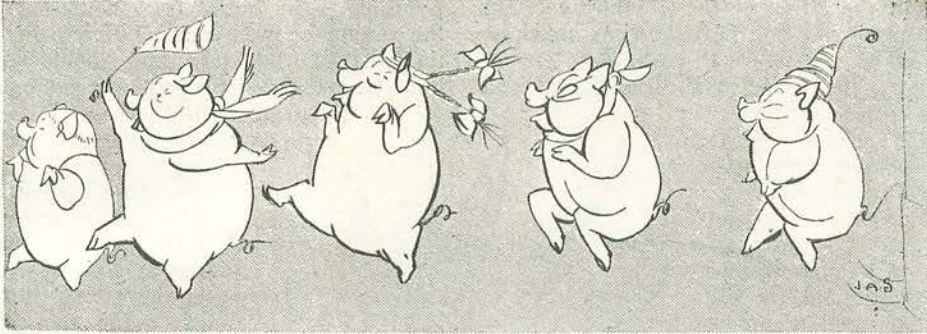
"THE OLD SOW AND HER LITTLE ONES ACCUSED."

In some cases we are told of creatures obeying the order to leave at once, and

Some very small culprits were brought up for trial at Sauvigny, in 1457. An old sow and her three or four little ones were brought into court, accused of killing a little child and partly eating it. Such instances were

The old sow was accordingly publicly hanged in the market-place, and the little pigs were pardoned, and let loose upon the world again.

There was no S.P.C. in the Middle Ages.



"THE LITTLE PIGS WERE PARDONED."

not uncommon in the Middle Ages, when scavengers were unknown and vestries were not, and when pigs and dogs wandered about the narrow, dirty streets of the towns in search of food, and were often ferocious and savage creatures. The case was proved against the old sow, and her advocate had not a word to say on her behalf. But, he argued, it could not be just or right to punish the youthful pigs, who had merely followed their mother's bad example, and could not be expected to know any better. Besides, there was no clear proof that they had assisted at the murder of the child, although it could not be denied that they had joined in the repast. The defence was accepted.



"ST. THOMAS."

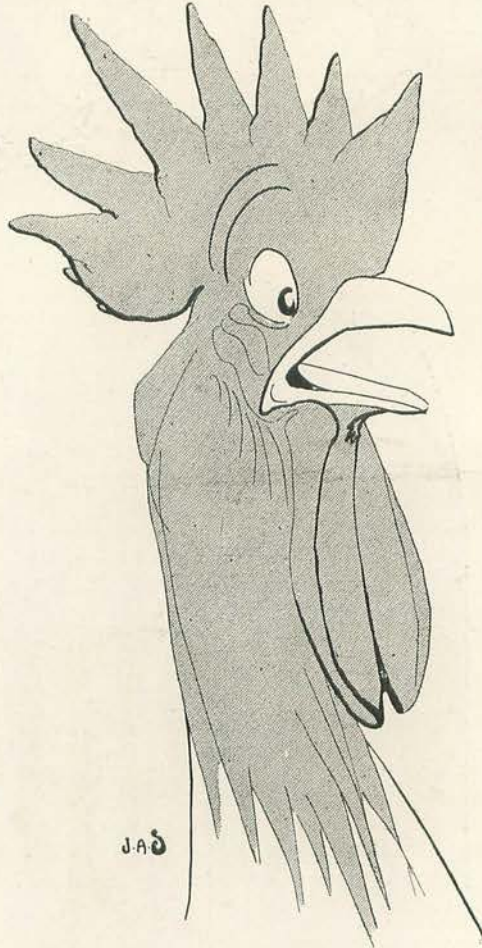
Yet, if creatures had a bad time of it sometimes, at others they reached a pitch of honour and glory which it would be hard to equal nowadays. As, for example, in a ceremony which used to be enacted at Aix, in Provence, on Corpus Christi Day. A tom-cat, the first that could be procured, was wrapped in swaddling clothes, decorated in divers ways, and placed in a shrine to be displayed to a kneeling and adoring crowd. Incense was burnt before him, flowers were strewn around him, and, for one day at least, he became the cynosure of all eyes. But on the festival of St. John a very different scene was to be observed, when numbers of

unhappy cats were thrown into a large fire which was lighted by the priests, and their sacrifice was celebrated by hymns and processions of clergy and people. Perhaps the animals who were brought up for regular trial had a better time of it than those who fell into the hands of the Church: exorcism certainly could not have hurt as much as burning alive.

One of the strangest of all mediæval trials took place at Basle, in 1474, when a cock was accused of the diabolical crime of laying an egg. A cock's egg, as everybody knows, was a thing most eagerly desired by all witches and wizards, and at that time such people were devoutly believed in and held in general horror. The cock, therefore, had no

chance. By supplying an article which could be used for all kinds of wickedness, he was clearly an accessory before the fact. It was of no avail that his advocate argued that the laying of an egg was an involuntary act, not premeditated, and as such ought not to be punished. He *might* have contested that the action showed distinct originality on the part of the cock, and should therefore be admired instead of condemned.

But, whatever his defence, it was unavailing. Public opinion was dead against him. The end of the affair was that the unfortunate cock was burnt at the stake, and his egg with him, as a warning to all sorcerers, and to such of his kind as might be tempted to follow his pernicious example.



"THE COCK ACCUSED OF LAYING AN EGG."