

Old Travellers' Yarns.

BY FRAMLEY STEELCROFT.



OUR traveller, real or self-styled, can always be relied upon to impress people. He always *could* be relied upon in this way, ever since the dawn of history; and if he came

back from more or less foreign parts without *something* blood-curdling to tell, he was promptly voted an impostor.

I am talking throughout of mediæval travellers only. In these days, of course, we expect little that is sensational from our explorers—little that calls for more emotion than a yawn. But in those grand old lurid days, you would readily have been credited had you related as an eye-witness, details of a sanguinary battle between leviathans at the corner of the Bethnal Green Road.

I have been at some pains to seek out pictorial yarns from many priceless old books scattered up and down the libraries of Europe; and the whole point of this article lies in the fact that the pictures reproduced are supposed to depict *exactly what the traveller saw*. Furthermore, every book I have drawn upon is of the "heaviest" scientific kind; so that these fantastic yarns were first of all gravely discussed by the learned bodies of the day, and then recorded in ponderous Latin tomes for the guidance and instruction of a less adventurous posterity.

Will it be believed that the magnificent yarn depicted in the accompanying picture was seriously recorded in one of the early volumes of the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society? The illustration is from Munster's monumental "Geography" published about 1580. They were far too quick in jumping to conclusions in those days. Because barnacles were found on pieces of floating wood,

it was thought (logic extraordinary!) that barnacles grew on trees. But from even this tall order to the astounding yarn depicted in the picture there was a terrific stretch of imagination. Here we not only see the barnacles growing on a tree at the water's edge, but we also see the barnacles being *hatched into geese* by some occult process of incubation. Furthermore, you may perceive the half-fledged birds swimming away for dear life, as if anxious to put a few miles, as soon as possible, between them and the place of their truly remarkable origin.

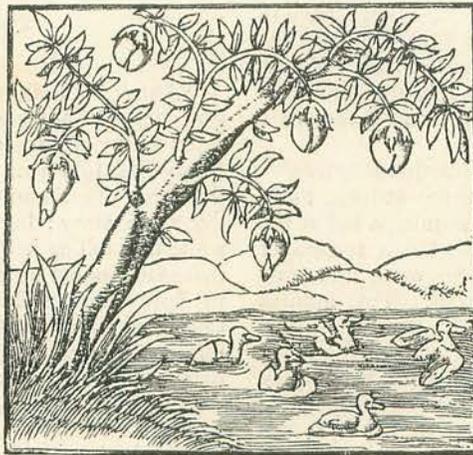
The next three pictures are from "De Bry's Travels," a work which enjoys the distinction of being the very first book to be brought out in parts. It was published in Flanders, between 1590 and 1620; and so rare is it now, that a complete copy is worth £500. Readers of THE STRAND MAGAZINE who would like to possess the only copy in this country will find it at Mr. Quaritch's famous

bookshop, in Piccadilly. De Bry didn't exactly travel himself; he just collected (and embellished) all the likely travels he could lay hands upon. His book was a standard work of reference in its day.

The first illustration shows an alligator hunt in one of the Southern States of America. The manner of the hunt was sublimely simple. Having removed their overcoats, the sportsmen tickled the saurian's mouth with a long

pole, and then waited for the monster to walk up it. When the alligator had taken as much pole as he could conveniently carry, he was turned over and done to death with bows and arrows, spears, clubs, or anything else handy. By a miraculous chance, both operations happened to be going on when the explorer made his sketch.

Yes, travellers in olden times saw queer



WHERE GEESSE GREW ON THE TREES.

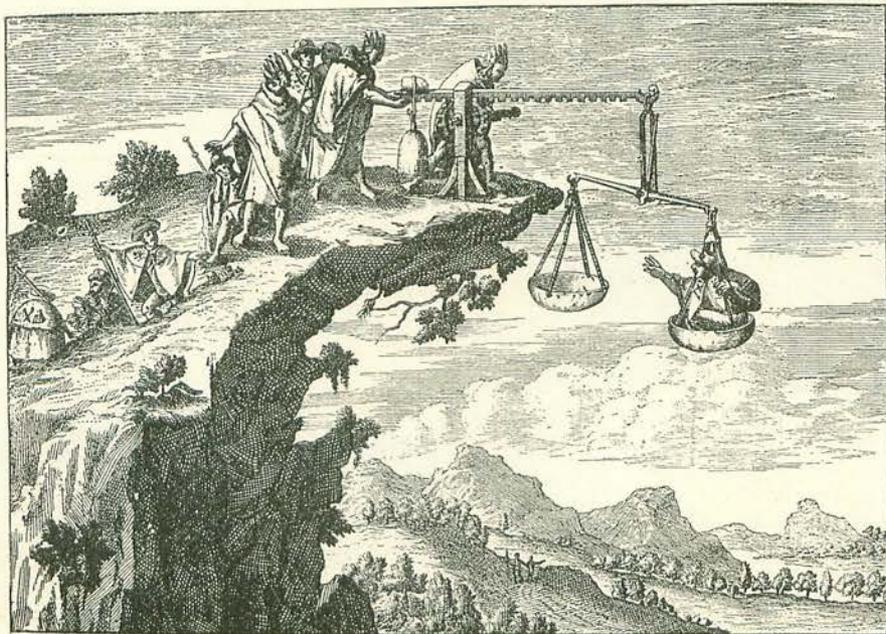


AN ALLIGATOR HUNT IN ONE OF THE SOUTHERN STATES.

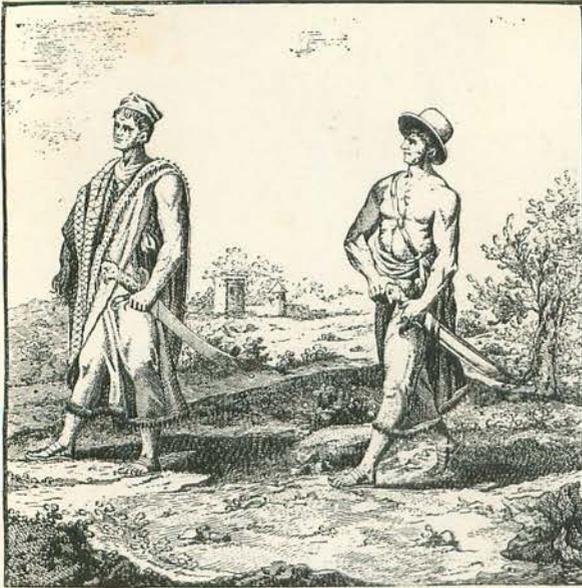
things—or thought they did, which, for practical purposes (such as impressing contemporaries), came to the same thing. Many of the self-styled “explorers” never stirred beyond their own unhallowed firesides, but they had such superb imaginations that it were harsh to call them liars.

Here is the second De Bry picture. It represents a method of extorting confessions

from people accused of various crimes. The thing is picturesque and was efficacious. The precipice seems made for the ordeal. The scene is somewhere in South America, at the time of the Spaniards’ arrival. The custom is described by a Spanish explorer. The king is sitting on the left. He must be the king, or he wouldn’t sit like that. Then there is the warrior who keeps his majesty



QUEER METHOD OF EXTORTING CONFESSION FROM A CRIMINAL.



NOBLEMAN AND COMMONER "FROM THE CONGO."

posted up in the news concerning the prisoner's demeanour. Next comes the torturer—the tall gentleman at the weighted lever. The priest is leaning over the precipice ready to receive the confession of the poor man who sits in the scales of injustice.

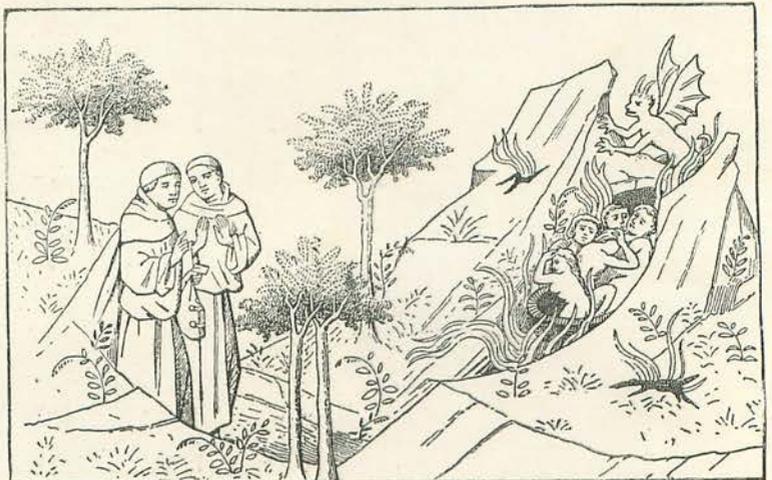
The third illustration from De Bry is really very interesting, as showing what little light was shed upon the dark places of the world in those days. The picture also "gives away" everybody connected with De Bry's *magnum opus*. The artist had to draw two figures representing respectively a nobleman (!) and a commoner from the Congo. But he hadn't even the remotest idea what the Congolese were like—*didn't even know they were black!* What did that artist do? He thought a little, knowing his responsibilities and the importance of that great book; then he sat down and produced the two figures shown in the above illustration. Not only are both the Congo natives perfectly white, but they have every appearance of stalwart Roman citizens. Notice the toga, the

falchion, the sandals, and the noble bearing, and then think of the brutish cannibals of the Belgian Congo!

In the next picture we see that a certain Friar Oderic and his travelling companion have inadvertently lighted upon a sort of minor Inferno, or place for lost souls. Belief in a place of this kind somewhere in Central Asia was very widespread in the Middle Ages. Travellers heard strange noises in the wilderness—unearthly wailings and sighings, and that kind of thing, so they concluded that they must be in the vicinity of a branch purgatory at the very least. Thus the idea of this place became a fixed tradition, which, of course, grew into absolute certainty after Friar Oderic had plucked up sufficient courage to "go the whole hog," and declare that he had actually visited the

spot. Notice the timid demeanour of the two monks; also the air of proprietorship assumed by the leading demon—who, by the way, seems rather to revel in the curious forked tongues of flame that are bursting from the mountain. It was never pretended that this was actually the headquarters of purgatory. Friar Oderic expressly speaks of it as a sort of overflow establishment. It is an interesting fact that the strange noises which gave rise to this singular story were merely the sounds made by the wind blowing the sand about in the deserts.

Almost every newly-discovered scientific phenomenon was made to serve as the



FRIAR ODERIC ARRIVES AT PURGATORY.



THE LAMB-TREE OF TARTARY, SHOWING LAMB EMERGING.

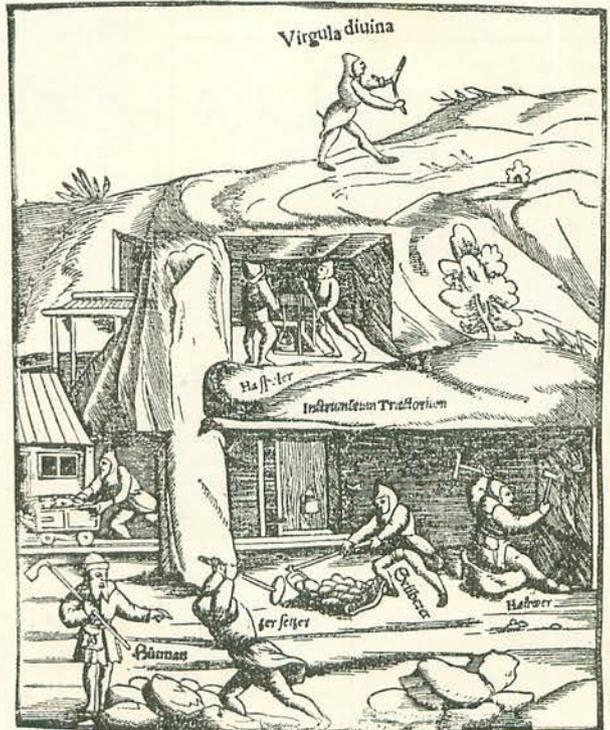
Occasionally the old travellers made an excursion into philology, and their efforts at derivation were at least ingenious and strenuous. Some of them heard that certain saurians bore upon their back striated marks resembling crosses. Well, one explorer straightway described to a wondering world a giant Cape lizard he had met which bore three perfect crosses on its back. Our

foundation for some extravagant yarn. Here is another picture from what is meant to be a serious book of travel in Central Asia. In Tartary grows the lamb-tree, remarkable for its woolly fruit. The illustration, however, shows a lamb-tree more wonderful than even the magic of a Hindu sorcerer. It is an impressive scene. The ubiquitous Friar Oderic has come across a tree on which birds grow, and he has a branch full of ornithological "blooms," and handed it to one of his companions. This is neat, not to say striking, but it is heavily countered by the local king. Up comes this monarch with some ripe fruit from the lamb-tree, and it will be seen that a lamb is just emerging from what looks like a big cocoon.

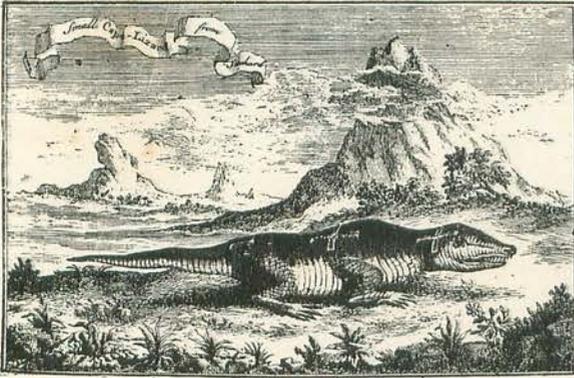
author himself made a sketch of the monster from life, of course, and he pointed out the crosses as being the origin of the generic name *croc-odile*.

The ancient explorers—or, rather, many of them—certainly did visit "furrin parts," more or less, and they collected a deal of natural history—again, more or less. This leads one up to the next reproduction, which depicts an ostrich partaking of its midday

One of the very earliest allusions to the divining rod—if not the earliest—is contained in the next picture, which is taken from an ancient work, in Latin, published in the fourteenth century. Everybody knows that the divining rod is merely a forked twig, which, held by a sensitive medium, enables that gifted person to discover the presence of water, coal, gold, and other treasures that lie hid in the earth. In this picture the artist has permitted us to see both diviner and miners at work. The former is walking as though for a wager; he has a strictly business-like air. So, too, have the subterranean toilers, who are nearly all working as though for dear life.



FIRST REPRESENTATION OF THE DIVINING-ROD.



HOW CROCODILES GOT THEIR NAMES. (FROM THE "CROSSES.")

meal. Be it understood that in all cases the author of these quasi-scientific works declared in the text that he had actually *seen with his own eyes* the creatures and incidents represented in his quaint illustrations.

Now as to that ostrich. To cut a long story short, it was alleged that the bird ate absolutely nothing else but old iron. He would, it was stated, go out of his way for this delicacy—pursue a caravan for miles for it. In the picture we see the bird "chewing up" a key that might

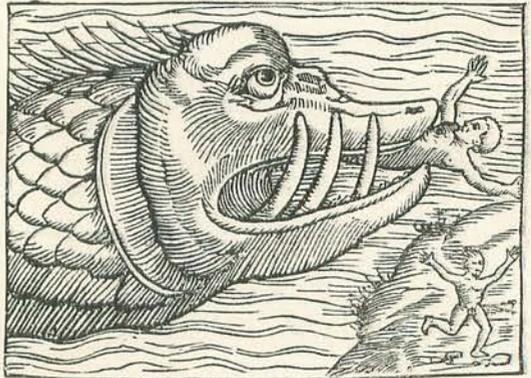


THE OSTRICH THAT ATE ONLY OLD IRON.

have opened the Bastille itself. A horseshoe forms the next course, so to speak, and the great bird is looking back at this with an air of complacent anticipation.

Of course, many of our old travellers honestly thought they were acting in the best interests of science by promulgating these yarns. They—some of them, that is—laboriously prepared fantastic maps of non-existent islands and continents, and even decorated the margins of these with drawings of fearsome monsters which were supposed to inhabit them or their shores. The accompanying illustration is taken from the margin of a map prepared by the great Scandinavian geographer, Olaus Magnus, who lived in

the fifteenth century. The picture is a very early representation of the sea-serpent. We see that of the two persons on the sea-shore one was taken and the other left. Perhaps they were bathing at some Scandinavian Margate when the monster reared his frightful head out of the water. The horror of the one that was "left" is very comically expressed.



A VERY EARLY SEA-SERPENT.

Next are seen two interesting groups, representing tribes who were supposed to exist in Africa. These drawings were carefully made from descriptions furnished by the explorers themselves, and the whole business of recording what was known of these strange peoples was conducted with such great gravity as befitted a monumental work on anthropology. The little man on the extreme left in the first picture is one of the Monopodi, every one of which tribe possessed but one leg and foot.

The size of that solitary foot, however, amply compensated for the absence of the other. As a fact, when it rained, hailed, or snowed, the Monopodi fell on their backs and hoisted

headed dwarf completes this interesting but fearsome group.

With the respectful nigger in the next picture is shown a member of a tribe, surely the most extraordinary ever conceived by the mind of man. This wonderful being is blessed (or cursed) with ears of such extraordinary size, that at night he lies down upon one and covers himself up with the other, being in this way provided with an ever-present supply of bed and bedding.

Really, it is most amazing to learn what direful myths were gravely accepted regarding places now as familiar to us as Brighton or Scarborough; and that right down to recent times. We reproduce here a comparatively wonderful picture from a work called "Routes in the Swiss Alps, made in 1702-11." The author was one Schenchzer, and the work was published in Leyden.

The illustration shows the author-explorer, Schenchzer, actually meeting with a terrible dragon in the lower Alps. His



STRANGE TRIBES FROM THE WILDS OF THE EARTH.

their vast expanse of foot, thus resting secure beneath their extraordinary tent, precisely as we see their representative doing in the picture.

The next figure shows one of the Monoculi — Cyclopean fellows with only one eye, and that in the middle of the forehead. The man in the picture seems to be laying down the law to his large-footed neighbour.

Next we have one of those awful people who have no head, but merely a face on their breast. Othello, relating his adventures to Desdemona, spoke of ". . . Anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders." The Cynocephali, or dog-headed people,



A DRAGON IN THE ALPS.



THE LONG-EARED MAN SCOLDS HIS SERVANT.

are next represented by a fierce-looking creature, evidently spelling out sentences in the deaf and dumb language. A two-

dismay and horror at the awful spectacle are well portrayed. These pictures will doubtless prove interesting and amusing to the hundreds of thousands of holiday-makers who now flock annually to Switzerland; and it is instructive to reflect that so recently as the last century the "playground of Europe" was so little known to outsiders that it was supposed to be over-run with dragons and man-headed snakes!

Perhaps no yarn had so long a tenure of life as that relating to the existence of dog-headed people. In the Middle Ages every

explorer who returned from Africa ("Out of Africa always something new," as the old Latin tag has it) was questioned as to the dog-headed people. If he said he hadn't seen them he was put down as an unobservant ass; therefore, *everybody* saw them, of course.

One solitary dog-headed warrior actually defeated a whole army belonging to Alexander the Great—at least so runs the legend in the work from which the next picture was taken. It seems that the weapons borne by Alexander's soldiers passed harmlessly through the Cynocephali (as the dog-headed folks were called); and in the picture we see a deadly combat in progress between

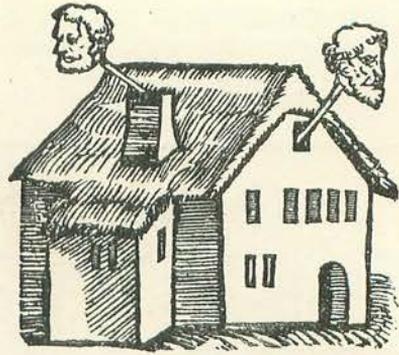


THE DOG-HEADED MAN CONQUERS THE MACEDONIAN WARRIOR.

one of these invulnerable monstrosities and a Macedonian warrior.

Friar Oderic gives the following account of the Cynocephali, as absolutely authentic. After the Flood, one of the sons of Japheth lost his wife in child-birth, and so he appointed as wet-nurse—a she-dog! This recalls the story of Romulus and Remus. When the child grew up he manifested "doggy" sympathies, and he ultimately left such civilization as then existed, and became the progenitor of the dog-headed race.

Talking of civilization, here is an interesting picture from "Munster's Geography," which illustrates how an explorer knew when he had arrived at a tolerably civilized town or village. The traveller explained that in his journeyings through Africa (*toujours l'Afrique!*) he always felt easy in his mind when they hoisted the signals of law and order in this way. The "signals" were merely human heads stuck on long poles that protruded from the windows of the houses; but they served to show that male-

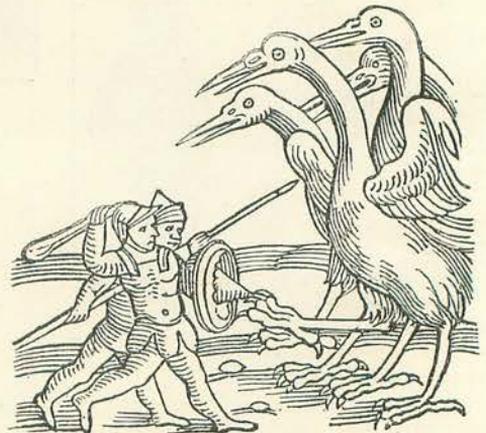


PECULIAR SIGNS OF LAW AND ORDER.

factors were punished in that place, and that life and property were respected.

Each explorer seemed to make it a rule to corroborate on his return some legend that had obtained credence for ages. People liked to say "they always *did* think it was so." Take the ancient Homeric idea of the pigmies fighting with the cranes. Herodotus believed the yarn with child-like simplicity (poor Herodotus would have believed anything); but Strabo was not to be caught with such chaff, and he rejected the legend. However, the fact remains that a traveller *did* return from the wilds of the earth with the usual lying sketches "made from life," and backed up with a narrative that fairly floors one with its wealth of detail. The curious combat is shown in the accompanying picture, which was photographed by our artist from the original work.

The quaint illustration next given is from a weighty work on geographical science, published in the fourteenth century. This book contains what is virtually the first mention of the story of Bishop Hatto,



FIGHT BETWEEN THE PIGMIES AND THE CRANES.

and that stirring legend is given as an absolute fact, in connection with a certain castle on the Rhine, near Bingen. The story is familiar to all of us. Hatto, Archbishop of Mainz, had a highly original plan for relieving the famine that afflicted Germany about the year 914. Unfortunately the plan can't be recommended to the Indian Government. The Bishop just collected all the poor people in a barn and burnt them alive. In his case, Nemesis took the form of mice (some say rats, but why quarrel over a rodent?). They came in threatening battalions, and Hatto retreated to a castle on



ONE OF THE HUMAN-FACED ANIMALS.



FIRST REPRESENTATION OF THE BISHOP HATTO LEGEND.

an island in the Rhine, the mice following in millions, swimming vigorously. They swarmed into the boat, and, later on, in at the castle windows. "And at last," says the old chronicle, quaintly, "he (Hatto) was devoured by these sillie creatures."

In the picture, the Bishop is yet a good way from his stronghold. The first instalment of the "sillie creatures" have made their appearance; and the leader is whispering tidings of doom in the prelate's right ear.

The extraordinary creature next reproduced was, of course, actually supposed to exist. As a fact, the author of the work from which it was copied (one of the earliest of printed books) gives blood-curdling accounts of his adventures among these monsters. The one reproduced bears a ludicrous

resemblance to a certain eminent statesman.

A very peculiar story is told in the picture next reproduced. The scene is a monastery near Hang Chow, in China, and one of the monks is feeding a number of queer monsters that are emerging from a cave. It was the much-travelled Friar Oderic who visited this strange place. In his pompous book, Oderic relates how holy men who needed a period of rest, meditation, and prayer withdrew their souls from their bodies, and caused the former to enter into these curious beasts. In the picture, Friar Oderic is being shown the "animals" at feeding time. The "holy-men-animals," as one must dub them, are not particular as to food. As a rule, the leavings from the monks' table fall to their lot; but one is not told what return the monks get when their strange guests see fit to put an end to their period of seclusion from the world.



MONKS FEEDING THE MAN-BEASTS.