

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XI

NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 450 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.
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Folks Used to Believe

by ALVIN F.
HARLOW

Conceptions of Deity



THE early Christian artists were very careful to avoid any representation of God in their paintings or sculpture. For example, He is only symbolically indicated by a hand stretched out to stay the knife of Abraham from Isaac, issuing from the clouds to give the tables of law to Moses, or holding a crown over the head of Christ, the Virgin or the saints. In a Greek painting executed as late as the Eighth Century, the souls of the righteous in a state of beatitude are represented by five infant figures in a gigantic hand thrust out from the clouds.

It was not until the Ninth or Tenth Century that artists dared to paint their ideas of the personal appearance of God. At first a head alone was pictured—for instance, a winged head with a cruciform halo, surrounded by numerous stars, uttering the word FIAT, which calls the earth and its inhabitants into being. Later on, the bust began to be drawn amid the clouds, and finally the whole body.

The Almighty was pictured variously as the God of Battles, armed with sword and bow, as a king or an emperor, or in Italy oftenest in

the vestments of a pope. A window at Troyes, France, shows Him as a bearded papal figure, throned in glory, crowned with a quintuple tiara and robed in alb and tunic, even with the papal slippers.

Most of the artists conceived great age in His appearance. As the "Ancient of Days," He is shown as a feeble old man, bowed by the weight of years, leaning heavily on a staff or even reposing on a couch after the labors of creation. One picture of the Creation represents Him as a tottering old man in ecclesiastical vestments and with a lantern in His hand.

With the degradation of taste in the Middle Ages, the conceptions were often coarse and even imbecilic. Attempts to picture the Trinity were made in grotesque figures with three heads, or a head with three faces joined together. In other examples, the Trinity is represented by three stiff, aged figures, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost being identified by the tiara, the cross and the dove. The three figures are enveloped in one common robe, and are jointly crowning the Virgin Mary in Heaven, her train being borne by angels.