

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Folks Used to Believe

by ALVIN F.
HARLOW

The Cockatrice



A FABULOUS animal which was believed in by many until comparatively recent times was a cockatrice. In the Middle Ages it was supposed to have the head, feet, wings and body of a barnyard cock save that it had scales instead of feathers; but its body tapered into a long, scaly tail like a dragon's. Its origin is thus described in an old manuscript:

"When a cock is past seven years old, an egg grows within him, whereat he greatly wonders. He seeks privately a place on a dunghill or in a stable and scratches a hole for a nest, to which he goes ten times daily. A toad privately watches him and examines the nest every time the cock leaves it, to see if the egg yet be laid. When the toad finds the egg, he rejoices much, and at length hatches it, producing an animal with the head, neck and breast of a cock and from thence downwards the body of a serpent. And that is a Cockatrice." But by the early part of the Eighteenth Century, zoologists agreed that this idea of a cockatrice was erroneous; it had no feet or legs and was more like a snake.

It is thus described in a book on

zoology published in 1759: "The Cockatrice is called the King of Serpents, not from his Bigness, for he is much inferior in this Respect to a great many Serpents; but because of his majestic Pace, for he does not creep upon the Ground like other Serpents, but goes half upright; for which Cause all other Serpents avoid him." The author then describes the production of the beast, substantially as it is given above. "Some are of the opinion," he adds, "that the Cock that lays the Egg, sits upon and hatches it himself. . . . The Cockatrice is about half a Foot in length; the hinder Part like a Serpent, the fore Part like a Cock. These Monsters are bred in Africa and some other Parts of the World. Authors differ about the Bigness of it; some say it is a Span in Compass and half a Foot long; others will have it to be three or four Feet long, and some the Thickness of a Man's Wrist and proportionable in Length. The Eyes of a Cockatrice are red. Its Poison is so strong that there is no Cure for it. The Poison infects the Air to that Degree that no other Creature can live near him. It kills not only by his Touch, but by Sight and Hissing."