

MYTHS OF WEIRD MONSTERS OUR ANCESTORS BELIEVED

Fearsome Beasts with Human Faces Shot Quills and Ate Men; Sea Serpents Wrecked Ships and Swallowed Sailors; and the Dormouse, a Cure for Warts, Drank No Water

By Bob Becker

FRIGHTFUL looking Mantichoras with human heads and lion-like bodies; Lamias with faces so beautiful that they lured men to death; sea serpents that were 120 feet long and could easily grab a poor sailor right off the deck of a sailing vessel—these were a few of the terrible beasts which were supposed to have taken human lives about 300 or 500 years ago, if we believe early writers on natural history subjects. After looking at some of the pictures of these awful monsters which are described in natural history volumes more than three centuries old, one is surprised that sailors had nerve enough to make a voyage, or that hunters dared to go into a dark forest for game.

One of the most interesting old books, which tells you to "look out for big, bad Mantichora" and describes all the curious "beastes" and serpents in the world, is that written by Edward Topsell in 1607. It is entitled "Historie of Four-Footed Beastes and Serpents." An original copy, profusely illustrated, its heavy pages yellowed by age, is owned by the Newberry library in Chicago.

If we believed Topsell, the Mantichora (supposed to be found in India) was terrible enough to keep everybody out of that country. He tells us that this monster had the feet and the size of a lion, the face and ears of a man, and was bright red in color. Its tail had quills which could be thrown at an enemy, its voice sounded like a trumpet, and the beast could run like a deer. As if the Mantichora still needed a few more blood curdling characteristics, the author tells us that it fed upon human flesh and was the only animal in India that liked such food. Just to make sure that the reader would remember the Mantichora

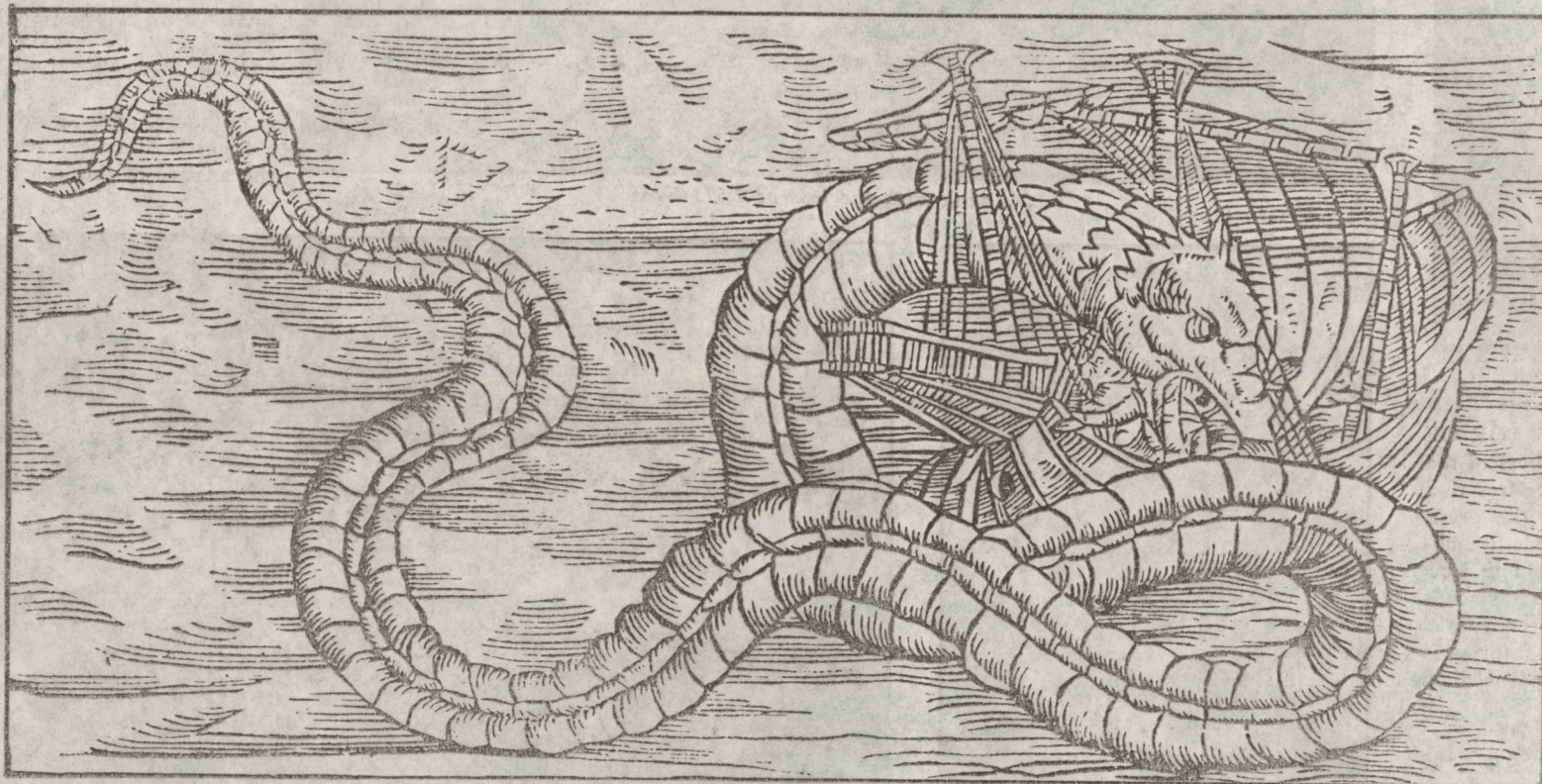
and really be convinced of its existence, the author had a drawing made to prove his case; and, turning the pages of the "Historie," we see the Mantichora with chin whiskers and every-

thing. There were all kinds and colors of sea serpents in the old days, if we believe the early writers on natural history. One observer reported a common garden variety of sea serpent living in the Baltic sea, which was only about 30 or 40 feet long. Olaus Magnus is reported to have seen this Baltic sea monster. But the prize sea serpent of all oceans, the blue ribbon winner up to 1607, was the 120 footer "appearing off the coast of Norway," according to Top-



Above: An early conception of the American bison, or buffalo, as printed in Hennepin's "New Discovery in America," which was published in 1698. The upside-down animal in the upper corner is supposed to be an opossum, and at the left is a pelican.

At left: In 1607 an artist considered this group of dogs fairly representative of some of the breeds. Imagine owning a pet like the one in the foreground—a dog with a human face!



One hundred twenty feet long and so powerful that it tipped over big vessels . . . this is the kind of sea serpent that early writers thought existed off the Norwegian coast 300 and more years ago. This old drawing shows the serpent gobbling up a poor sailor.

sell. This writer naively states that it was "very dangerous and hurtful to the Sea-men in calmes and still weather." The huge 120 foot serpent had two bad tricks. First, he used to come up to the side of a boat, stick his head over the deck, and gobble up a sailor or two. Secondly (so the story goes), this serpent when quite annoyed would churn up the ocean and thresh around so furiously that vessels would tip over and down would go boat, cargo, and all.

But of all the awful beastes and monsters of which the mere mention was enough to scare old world inhabitants 300 years ago, the Lamia easily ranked first as a deadly menace to man. According to Topsell, who describes the Lamia at great length, this curious creature "was the swiftest of foot of all earthly beastes" and, worst of all, by their fraud "they overthrew men!" Topsell calls attention to the beautiful face of the Lamia, a face so seductive and charming that it was irresistible to men. The Lamia (which, unfortunately, no museum ever has been able to collect!) apparently was the next thing to a "phairie" (fairy); possibly one of the original sirens. Anyway, men were warned in 1607 to beware of a Lamia, because it would smile, lure a man within reach, kill him with its ugly claws, and then feed upon his flesh.

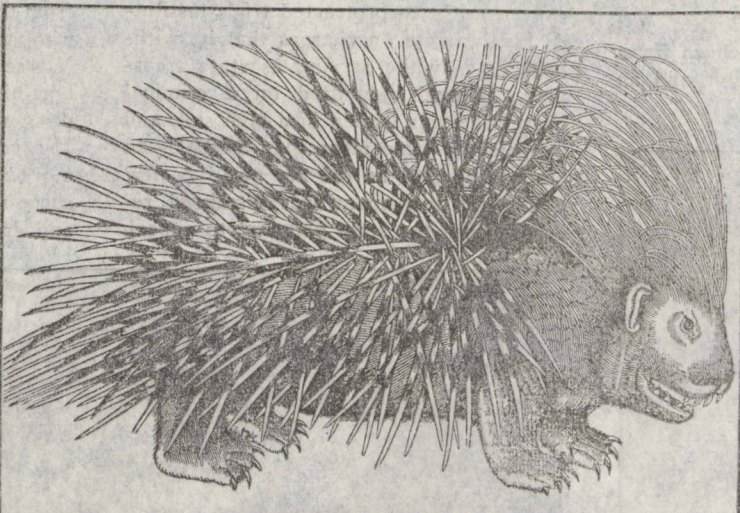
Another monster which our ancestors believed to exist in deep forests was one of a "yellowish carnation color," with hind feet like those of



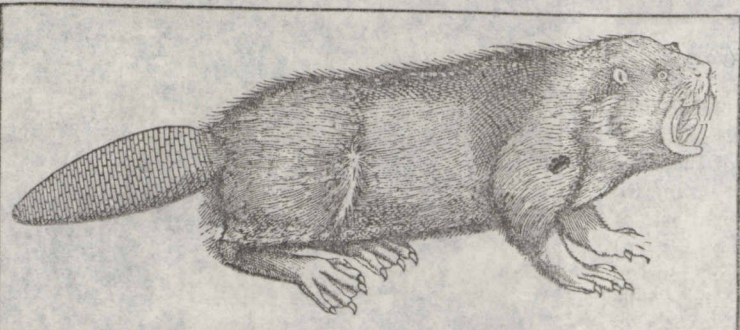
More than 300 years ago men were warned to look out for this extraordinary animal, the "Lamia." With a woman's face, this beast was said to lure men to their death and then eat them.

a bird and front feet like an animal. A forest called Tannesburgh is supposed to have produced this beast, which was so wild that "he could not be drawne to look upon any man."

The porcupine, an interesting denizen of American forests, is pictured as a highly dangerous animal by the early writers on natural history. According to the scientists of 300 years ago, the porcupine had two kinds of quills. On his neck he had a few which stuck in his skin in a very permanent manner. But growing in his back was another set of quills which could be thrown like arrows. In fact, if



An early picture of a porcupine, which was considered a deadly animal 328 years ago because, according to early writers, the porky could throw its quills at hunters and dogs.



An early drawing of a beaver, as included in Topsell's "Historie of Four-Footed Beastes," printed in 1607. This picture emphasizes the large gnawing teeth of the animal.

we believe these early nature students, the porky could shoot his quills with so much force that he could make them stick in the bark of trees. Topsell describes the "bow and arrow act" of the porcupine in this graphic manner:

"When they are hunted the beast stretcheth his skin, and casteth them (the quills) off, one or two at a time, according to the necessity upon the mouths of the Dogs, or Legs of the hunters that follow him, with such violence that many times they flick into trees and woods." It isn't surprising that the poor, maligned porky was brought into Europe from "India and Affricke" and taken over the country "to be seen for money," as the author advises us. This myth that the porcupine can shoot its quills with considerable force has been repeated many times in the works of writers since 1607. Even the hardy adventurers who first settled on the eastern coast of America told about the porcupines which were able to shoot quills at their enemies!

The beaver is another animal which intrigued the early students of natural history—especially the uses of the beaver in treating sick people.

In reading the three-century-old accounts of the beaver's habits, his method of building a house in

the water, and other, characteristics of this interesting animal, it will be seen that considerably more accurate information had been secured about the beaver than about many other fairly common animals. In 1607, however, there was one myth which made the beaver a much feared animal. The story was that an unfortunate bitten by one of the animals couldn't be cured unless he could be placed where he could hear the beaver gnashing his teeth or chewing on something!

The little "dormouse," about the size of a squirrel, had some of the early writers puzzled because of one story which was told about this animal. A harmless looking little creature, the dormouse is specifically described by Topsell in his book on animals as "bigger in quantitie than a squirrel," with "a variable color." But the thing which puzzled him was the story to the effect that the dormouse did not drink water.

This doubt about the habits of the dormouse, however, did not prevent it from being considered a valuable animal for the home medicine cabinet. We are advised very seriously that a dormouse will remove warts if you bind a part of an animal to the afflicted spots. Moreover, there is nothing like the



Look out for the deadly Mantichora! In 1607 this bright red beast was believed to exist in India. And the story was that the Mantichora ate human flesh.

ashes of a dormouse, mixed with honey, for "those which desire the clearness of the eyes."

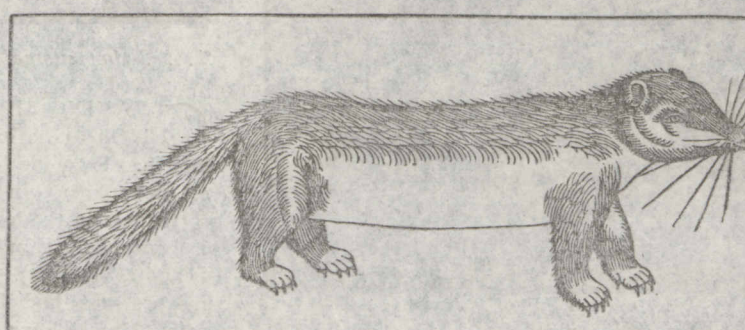
No animal in America inspired more fantastic or interesting stories than the bison, or buffalo. When the first explorers penetrated the plains regions they were fascinated by the great herds of these animals and the way the Indians hunted them.

We are indebted to Hennepin for one of the earliest and most interesting impressions of the buffalo. In his "New Discovery in America," written in 1698, we find the drawing of a huge, shaggy beast which looks as if it had just received a marcel wave. Above it an opossum is hanging by its tail. A pelican completes the quaint old picture, which is reproduced as one of the illustrations on this page.

"F. Louis Hennepin, Missionary Recollet" (as he signs himself) wrote that the Indians established ambushes for the "wild bulls and oxen," described the habits of the herds, and furnished us a general account of the buffalo quite in contrast to some of the fantastic animal stories which previous writers had included in their works.



Here is another "monster," a relative of the hyenas, which, according to early writers, was of a "yellowish carnation" color and so wild that only one or two men ever saw it.



What early writers called the "dormouse" was something of a puzzle to them, because the story was that this creature (about as big as a squirrel) did not drink water.