

THE DIET OF DRAGONS

I BEGAN my dossier on dragons in the Gold Coast last year.

We were on our way back from a week-end in Dahomey, the French Colony next door. Seven o'clock on a Sunday evening, at the end of August, and pitch dark (there is no double summer-time on the Coast), suddenly our head-lamps lit up a large creature crossing the road. Mid-way over this reddest and straightest of roads it paused, looked full at us with eyes like points of fire, turned and retired into the bush. "What was that?" I asked. It seemed a reptile about eight feet long, with a high humped back serrated like a saw. "Master, him see one dragon," said my driver, a black Presbyterian from Togoland, whose name was Andrew. "This dragon no good master, he chop young piccans." (By which Andrew wished to convey that the saurian fed on piccaninnies or native children). Andrew's brother, Boniface, a Jehovah's Witness, just converted to Seventh Day Adventism, disagreed: "Them dragon chop tree and grass, them no chop piccans at all at all," he said in a rather disparaging voice. And he added, to justify himself: "In my school I win two prizes for natural history."

*Excerpts from a talk by
JONATHAN CURLING,
in the BBC's Third
Programme*

The diet of dragons exercised my mind for some time afterwards. I was then well away from reference books. But I seemed to remember a remark in Pliny about dragons eating lettuces. So perhaps Boniface was right in asserting that dragons were vegetarians, and not, as Andrew had said, carnivorous. Now I have had a chance to find out about the gastronomics of dragons, and other incidental information on their habits. Pliny did specify salads. "Dragons," he said, "look for lettuces in the spring, to cure them of a nausea which habitually affects them at that time of year." Aristotle, too, supports this theory. "When the dragon has consumed much fruit," he says, "it searchest out the bitter lettuce. Yea, it has been seen to do this." And a slight variant is given by Aelian, in his *Nature of Animals*. "Dragons suck the juice of wild chicory, because this affords them a sovereign remedy against indigestion."

Fruit, according to ancient writers, figures often on the dragon's menu. But the dragon is "choosy" about the hands from which it takes the fruit. They must be chaste. For instance, some 20 miles out of Rome, along the Appian Way, there lived an elderly dragon who was the pet of the people of Lanuvium. No trouble at all. Only once a year a young girl was chosen to enter the noisome cavern in which the dragon dwelt—and offer him some fruit. "The very basket trembled in the maiden's hands," gloats the poet Propertius. The villagers and the maiden knew that if the girl had not been quite so good as was hoped for, the dragon would abandon his fruitarian regime, and the young lady would not emerge again from his den.

The Epirotes in Greece also kept a couple of tame dragons in a grove behind their Temple to Apollo. "Hither," some anonymous poetaster relates, "a sacred virgin comes alone, each autumn, and presents fruit to the monsters who are indubitably descended from the



JAPANESE DRAGON

Delphic python." Chinese dragons, I am told, are just as jealous about the morals of those who feed them. The azure dragon, for example. He is also something of a misogynist. In the Buddhist Testament, the *Kwoh-Shi-Pu*, the Azure Dragon is said "to accept sustenance from a chaste priest or candidate for the priesthood; if a nun or other female approach, then there is great lightning, thunder and tempest."

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