

Folks Used to Believe

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THE BASILISK



THE malignant eye of the basilisk has passed into a proverb, as something enticing, yet deadly. Authorities in ancient times differed as to whether the basilisk was more like a serpent, lizard or dragon. All agreed that it was comparatively small, yet very dangerous.

Pliny, the Roman naturalist of the First Century, said of it, "All who behold its eyes fall dead upon the spot. It is produced in the province of Cyrene, and is not more than twelve fingers in length. A white spot or star it carries on the head, and sets it out like a coronet or diadem. When it hisses, all other serpents fly from it; and it does not advance its body like the others, by a succession of folds, but moves along, erect and upright, upon the middle. It destroys all shrubs, not only by its contact, but those even that it has breathed upon; it burns up all the grass, too, and breaks stones, so tremendous is its noxious influence. It was formerly a general belief that if a man on horseback killed one of these

animals with a spear, the poison would run up the weapon and kill not only the rider but the horse as well. To this dreadful monster the effluvium of the weasel is fatal, a thing that has often been tried with success, for kings have often desired to see its body when killed; so true is it that it has pleased Nature that there should be nothing without its antidote. The weasel is thrown into the burrow of the basilisk, which is easily known from the soil around it being infected. The weasel destroys the basilisk by its odor, but dies itself in this struggle of Nature against its own self."

In later centuries it was claimed that the weasel could not kill the basilisk until after it had eaten some of the herb called rue. The basilisk was said to be dreadfully afraid of the weasel, and would flee at sight of it.

A genus of ugly South American lizardlike reptiles has been named Basilisk because of a sort of hood or pouch at the back of the head supposed to resemble the fabulous basilisk's "diadem."