ZOOLOGY

NATURE RAMBLINGS
by Frank Thone

The Boar's Head

IN THE lordly days of old manorial England, the Christmas feast used to be crowned, not with the bringing in of a roast fowl (though there were plenty of those, from hens to peacocks), but with the formal serving up of a great boar's head.

To us, who see nothing especially esthetic in a hog, this custom may seem a bit strange. But when we examine the historic background that lies behind it the strangeness vanishes.

For Christmas, or at least a midwinter feast, used to be celebrated pretty much all over the earth long before the coming of Christianity. The missionaries who came to our pagan forebears in the nordic lands abolished the old gods but kept the old feast, rededicating it to the Child of Bethlehem.

To the northern pagans the wild pig was an emblem of fertility, of good luck, of plenty of good eating. Even today the Germans preserve a relic of this belief in a slang phrase. When a man has had a stroke of good fortune, his felicitating neighbors say, "He's caught a pig!"

Therefore there was something almost sacramental about the eating of swine's flesh, and the head of the old boar, the father and fountain-head of the forest-roaming herd, was an article of especial religious virtue as well as of social prestige. So our remoter grandsires ate it, well knowing what it signified, and their intermediate descendants in more elegant days continued the custom though they had forgotten its meaning. No doubt many thousands of soundly orthodox squires and nobles, all through medieval and early modern times, carved boars' heads at Yuletide, never suspecting that they were continuing a sacrifice to the midwinter gods of their Celtic and Saxon forebears.

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MEDICINE

Treating Deficiency Diseases Is a Complicated Problem

Constitutional Variations, Infection, Allergy, Even Mental Upsets are Among Factors Involved

TREATING what doctors call the deficiency diseases, such as pernicious anemia, is often a complicated matter, and simply feeding an adequate diet is not always enough, Dr. William P. Murphy of the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, Boston, told members of the American Dietetic Association at the opening session of their annual meeting in Cleveland.

Dr. Murphy is one of the trio of American scientists who were awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine last year for their achievements in the conquest of pernicious anemia.

Diseases like pernicious anemia, diabetes and rickets are known as deficiency diseaes. They may arise because the patient has not eaten enough of the necessary food elements, or because his body is unable to utilize the food he eats, or because one or more of his glands fail to function normally, Dr. Murphy explained.

Unfortunately, Dr. Murphy said, an understanding of deficiency diseases is not so easy as a simple statement of the ways in which a deficiency may be produced may lead one to believe.

"For example, it is difficult to explain the development of anemia in one individual and not in another, both of whom may have a comparable intake of iron-containing foods. Constitutional variations, infection, allergy, intestinal disturbances, mental upsets, hemmorrhage, pregnancy and perhaps other factors may each play a part in the development of the diseases which are more commonly ascribed to the deficiency of a specific substance.

"So, because of the fact that the disease picture is often a complicated one, the treatment of a deficiency state is not the simple one of supplying the lacking substance but rather one of ministering to all of the needs of each patient, which needs may be determined only after the most detailed study and analysis of the individual's general state of health.

"Of the many deficiency states which have been recognized those which are dependent, at least in part, upon an inadequate supply of something usually supplied in the normal diet undoubtedly predominate. Into this group fall certain of the anemias."

Pernicious anemia sufferers no longer need to eat large quantities of liver daily, Dr. Murphy told the dietitians, since they can now remain well when taking injections of very small amounts of liver extract at intervals of two to four weeks. However, their diet must still be watched.

"Although liver or an effective substitute is of prime importance in building the blood it is always advisable to be sure that a normal, well balanced diet is being taken," Dr. Murphy said, "and in some instances the use of iron by mouth is necessary in order to allow hemoglobin formation to keep pace with the rapid increase in the red blood cells which is produced by the newer and more efficient treatment."

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