

THE DRAGON-TREE OF TENERIFE.

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The belief of the Greeks and Romans that somewhere beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, in the perilous and mysterious Atlantic, lay the beautiful islands of the Hesperides, where a dragon kept watch over a tree bearing apples of gold, was to some extent justified by a slender substratum of truth. For in the Atlantic, not so very far from Gibraltar, is to be found the little cluster of the Canary Islands, containing no dragon indeed, but a very wonderful tree, whose fruit is the size of a dwarf apple, and resembles red gold in colour. This tree is known as the dragon-tree, or *Dracæna draco*, and it lives to a greater age than any other plant.

The Canaries have often been called the Pleiades of the Atlantic, a constellation of seven small islands. It is perhaps more appropriate to compare them to a planet attended by six satellites, one of them, the island of Tenerife, being considerably more massive than the rest, as well as more interesting. The wonders that meet the eye of a visitor to this island are innumerable. The greatest and most overpowering is of course the huge quiescent volcano, crowned by the well-known peak, and covering with its irregular base the whole area of the island. The outline of the island is not unlike the side view of a boot, with the toe pointing north-east and the sole turned towards the north-west; and the Peak of Tenerife is situated exactly at the ankle. The total length of the island is sixty miles, and from every part of the coast-line the ground rises steadily, though with many ups and downs in some places, to the summit of the cone. The cone itself, a comparatively recent formation, stands in the middle of an ancient crater no less than eight miles in diameter. In ascending the volcano the visitor finds that the average slope of the sides upwards from the sea to the edge of this crater is by no means steep. The angle is not more, on the whole, than 12 degrees from the horizontal; but on reaching the edge he comes upon an almost precipitous descent of 1,800 feet into the great basin. As he traverses the basin towards the central cone, high above the level of the clouds, exposed to sunshine of tropical intensity, and winds of piercing chilliness, he passes the ice-cavern which so enchanted Humboldt, and although the volcano is classed as inactive, he comes to many a vent puffing out whiffs of volcanic breath, and many a place where the ground is almost too hot for his feet. If, then, the visitor to Tenerife is a geologist, he will find in the volcano itself enough to occupy his whole attention. If he is a botanist, he will have ample employment in studying the five distinct zones of vegetation that clothe the sides of the mountain; and if an anthropologist, in hunting for traces of that curious extinct nation, the Guanches, who embalmed their dead like the Egyptians. But whatever may be his particular hobby, or even if he has none, he can hardly fail to be interested in the singular natural product, indigenous to the seaboard of the island, known as the dragon-tree.

This extraordinary creature, which has been the theme of so many enthusiastic writers from the days of Captain Glas, is distinguished by a host of interesting characteristics. In the first place, there exudes from the crevices of the stem an astringent resin of a deep red colour, formerly used as a medicine and a dye, and called "dragon's blood" by the mediæval alchemists. Magic properties have been attributed to this substance. As recently as the last century, it is said, the Devonshire girls, on being crossed in love, would cast on the fire a little packet of the red powder, and repeat the words—

"May he no pleasure or profit see,
Till he again comes back to me."

But the resin is yielded in such small quantities that the supply for commercial purposes was unequal to the demand. As a dye it has consequently been superseded by the cochineal insect and the coal-tar colours, and as a drug by the produce of the rattan palm. A second peculiarity of the dragon-tree is the extreme slowness of its growth; a third is the fact mentioned above that it attains to a greater age than any other known plant. Before the year 1867 there existed in the island of Tenerife a specimen (to be presently described) which is estimated to have been at least 6,000 years old. But perhaps the most noteworthy point about the plant is that, notwithstanding its size, it cannot strictly be deemed a tree at all, but only a monstrous vegetable. While the botanists agree in classing it among the *Liliaceæ* or lily-like plants, their opinions are divided as to whether it should be called a lily proper or an asparagus, or whether it should be relegated to a separate family with the title *Dracæneæ*. On the whole, it is probable that if a census could be taken of the views of botanists a majority would be in favour of calling it a stick of asparagus.

What, then, is the dragon-tree like? Our first illustration is a portrait of an infant specimen now growing in the temperate house of the Botanical Gardens at Kew. It consists of straight, smooth, and fleshy stem, about 7½ feet in height, variegated towards the top with scars, where old leaves have dropped off. The stem is crowned by a bunch of long and stiff leaves shaped like sword-blades, the total height from the top of the pot being 12 feet. The plant has not yet flowered, and will probably not do so for another twenty years.

After its first flowering the beginnings of branches may be expected to appear, and the tree will then enter upon the long period of middle age. In the mature tree the branches rise up like the arms of a candelabrum, and as there are no leaves except at the tips of the branches, the foliage is usually massed into a flat slab at the summit of the tree.

Any one desiring to see the dragon-tree in its old age can still find splendid specimens in the Canary Islands. There is one, for example, at Icod Alto, and another at Icod de los Viños, both of which were in existence at the time of the subjugation of the islands by the Spaniards in 1493, and one of which is mentioned in the history of the Conquest. The large illustration is a portrait of one of them. But the traveller will look in vain to-day for the great, the ancient, the phenomenal dragon-tree which, prior to 1867, was to be seen at Villa de Orotava. When Tenerife was conquered, and the primitive inhabitants exterminated, this tree was already old. At the close of the fifteenth century the great stem was a landmark in the delimitation of two estates, and as such it is mentioned in ancient documents which are still preserved. The Spanish general, Alonzo del Lugo, shocked to find that the hollow trunk had been used by the aborigines for Druidical rites, converted it into a chapel for the celebration of the mass. Situated in sight of the cone of Tenerife, and possibly a witness of its formation, the primordial *Dracæna* was still healthy and vigorous at the opening of the present century. In 1819 a large limb (according to one account a third of the spreading top) was lopped off and other damage done by a tempest, and a huge portion of the stem was afterwards hacked away by a botanical vandal; but the tree was mended with masonry, and still there seemed to be no reason why it should not endure for many centuries more. But in 1867 there came an exceptional storm, which broke off the tree just at the point where the branches begin. Efforts were made to pre-