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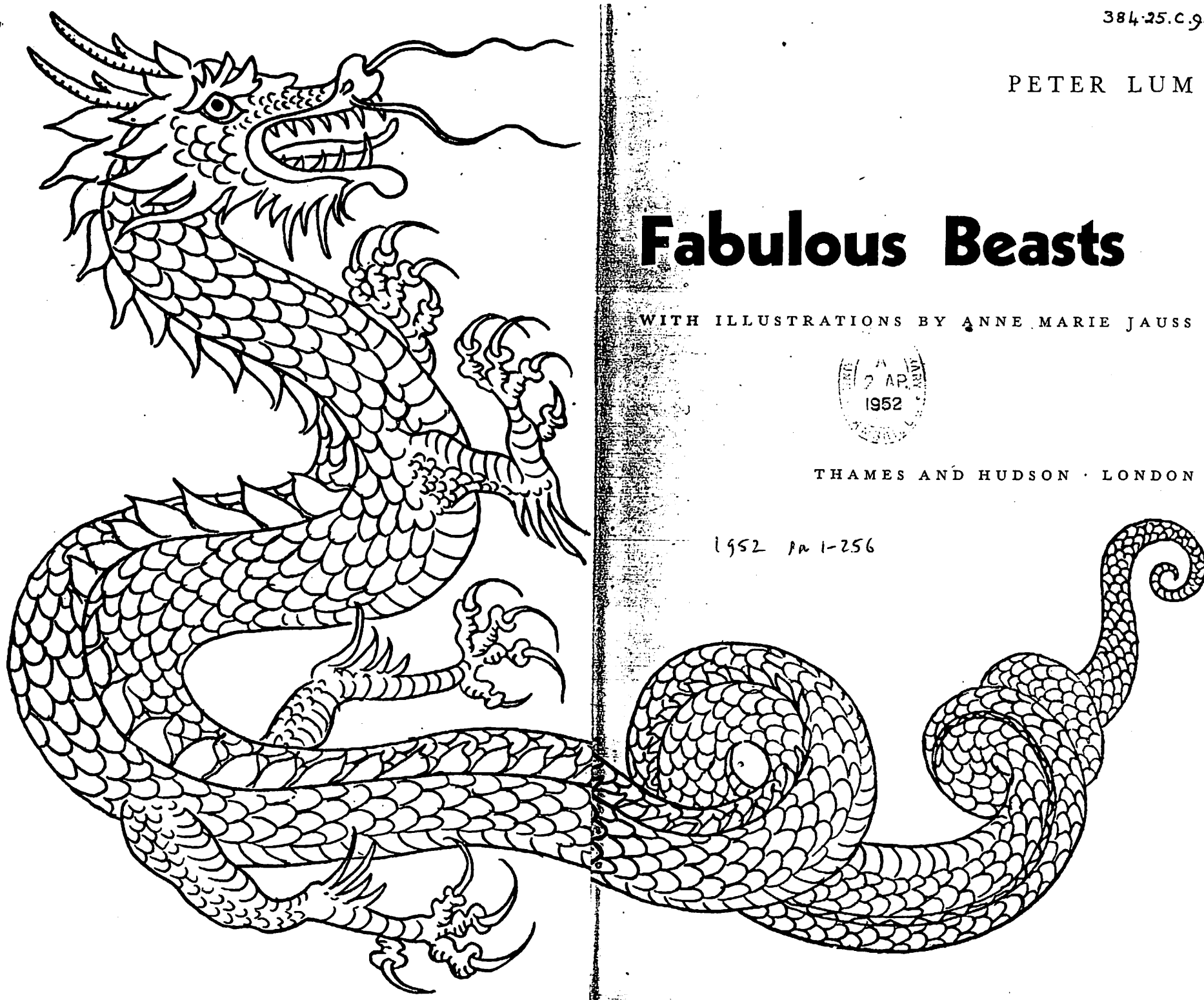
Fabulous Beasts

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNE MARIE JAUSS



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Sphinx as an emblem of death. Set, the evil genius of Egyptian religion, was sometimes represented by a gryphon, and there were gryphons among the retinue of monsters that followed Tiamat, the chaos dragon of the Chaldeans.

There is another aspect of the European gryphon, however, which carries us back again to the original cosmic bird-mammal senmurv and its dual nature. Dante, who frequently refers to "the Animal that is one single Person in two natures," uses the gryphon as a symbol of the union of the divine and the human in the Savior. This gryphon draws the car of the Church in the mystic procession of the Church Triumphant:

*"The space that lay between those four contained
A chariot of triumph with two wheels
And this was harnessed to a gryphon's neck.
He raised his wings through those six bands of color
On either side the center, in such wise
He harmed not one of them by piercing it.
So high they reached that they were lost to view.
Gold were the birdlike members that he had;
The others were of white, mixed with vermilion . . .
Even the sun's own chariot it outshone . . ."*



The Unicorn

"God himself must needs be traduced, if there is no unicorn."

EDWARD TOPSELL (1658)

THERE SEEMS TO BE NO REASON why the unicorn should not exist. In appearance it is far more plausible than many another living creature and, except for one or two mediaeval fancies as to the means of its capture and the remarkable value of its horn, it has none of the supernatural qualities or the absurdities ascribed to other fabulous beasts. Until two or three hundred years ago it was no more unrea-

sonable or credulous to believe in the unicorn than to credit the existence of any other animal that one had heard described by reputable observers but had not actually seen and touched. The elephant, the panther, and many other creatures were unknown in Europe, as the lion in China, but that was no reason to deny that they were to be found in other parts of the world; the evidence for the unicorn was equally convincing.

The unicorn was in fact the only one of the nonexistent animals described in the *Physiologus* that survived through the Renaissance, and could still be taken for granted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even the most learned naturalists, while dismissing with contempt the more dubious creatures believed in by their predecessors, the Chimera and the Sphinx, the tragelaphs and the manticoras, yet could not quite deny the unicorn. It was not until Cuvier in the early nineteenth century laid it down as a rule of nature that, because the bone of its forehead was divided, it was impossible for an animal with a cleft hoof to have a horn growing in the middle of its forehead, that science turned against the unicorn.

And even this rule has not put an end to the life of the unicorn, for it cannot be denied that one-horned animals have existed and do exist. Cæsar was witness to the one-horned oxen of the Hyrcanian forest, and individual specimens of one-horned cattle or horses were to be found among the possessions of monarchs from very early until almost modern times, usually the gift of a fellow potentate or of a subject in search of favors. They seem to have been a symbol of power. A one-horned ram was brought to Pericles in token of the leadership that was to be his; two unicorns were sent by a king of Ethiopia to the Sultan of Mecca in the fifteenth

century, and the Elector of Saxony was presented with one late in the seventeenth century.

Were these only freaks? Or were they individual animals that had been specially treated in some way that would make a normally two-horned creature into a unicorn, a process believed to have long been known to certain African tribes? Both solutions are possible, especially in view of a fascinating



experiment recently performed in America by Dr. Dove and described by Willy Ley in *The Lungfish, the Dodo, and the Unicorn*. In this experiment the two normal horn buds of a young calf were grafted together and transplanted to the center of the forehead, where they grew into a single and straight horn. Even more interesting than this was the result of the operation on the character of the bull. He grew to be stronger than the normal two-horned bulls, so that he naturally took over the leadership of the herd; at the same time,

sure of his power, he became unusually gentle and mild, thus displaying exactly the great strength and gentle nature of the legendary unicorn.

The unicorn, though not able to compete with the dragon in antiquity, is undoubtedly very old. Moreover, there are certain resemblances between the solitary, serene and noble unicorn so firmly and so long credited in Europe and the proud but gentle ki-lin of the Chinese sages, resemblances sufficient to argue a possible common origin in some real or fabulous creature.

The ki-lin seems to be the older of the two, though that may be only the result of the long continuity of the Chinese records. (The ki is actually the male unicorn, and the lin the female; thus the species is called ki-lin, or sometimes simply lin.) It appears but seldom, even in the records, and then usually either for some special purpose or to testify to the great virtue of the emperor. Its first known visit was during the reign of Fu Hsi, about 2800 B.C., one day when that emperor was sitting by the banks of the Yellow River and wondering how he could express his thoughts regarding the universe in such a way that they would be intelligible to men who followed him and whom he would never see. The unicorn came out of the river and approached the emperor. On his back were certain magic signs, which Fu Hsi carefully observed and copied. And it was from these signs, together with his knowledge of the movement of the stars, that Fu Hsi evolved the first written language of China. (A variant of this legend has it that he used the designs on the shell of the tortoise instead.)

After that the ki-lin appeared several times. It was seen in the palace grounds just before the death of Huang Ti, the Yellow Emperor, and a few of his most illustrious successors

caught a glimpse of it, and always its appearance was taken as proof of the virtue of the monarch and the perfection of his rule.

As described by Chinese writers, this ki-lin or unicorn is like a large deer in shape, but with the tail of an ox and the hoofs of a horse, and with a single short horn. Its voice is like a monastery bell. It is the incarnate essence of the five elements, fire, water, wood, metal and earth. And it is by nature so gentle that when it walks it lifts its feet high and places them most carefully, lest it should inadvertently step on a living creature; nor will it eat live grass, but only what is dead and therefore beyond injury. It lives alone in remote regions, and like its Western counterpart it can neither be captured nor slain. Of all the three hundred and sixty creatures that live on land, it is the leader, as the phoenix is first among birds and the dragon in water.

After its visits to the early and semilegendary emperors of China, the ki-lin disappeared for a time. Nor was this altogether surprising. The Middle Kingdom had fallen into evil ways; state warred with state, and kings with kings, and there was little virtue remaining in the land. Fu Hsi and Huang Ti were nothing more than a memory, no longer an example. The gentle ki-lin, the symbol of perfection, fled farther and farther from the shadow of men and was seen no more.

So it was in the sixth century B.C. At that time there lived at Tai Shan, in the state of Lü, a woman of exceptional virtue and piety, whose only grief was that she and her husband had no son. And since in China to be without a son is to be denied the life-after-death that only a son's worship can provide, she never ceased to sorrow and to pray that heaven might take pity on her. Her prayers remaining apparently

unanswered, she determined to undertake a pilgrimage to a temple of particular sanctity some distance away in the hills, and there appeal to the gods for the last time. And as she approached the lonely hill temple she trod without knowing it in the footsteps of the ki-lin. (There is a Chinese expression: "May the unicorn's hoof bring you good luck!" meaning "May you have many sons.")

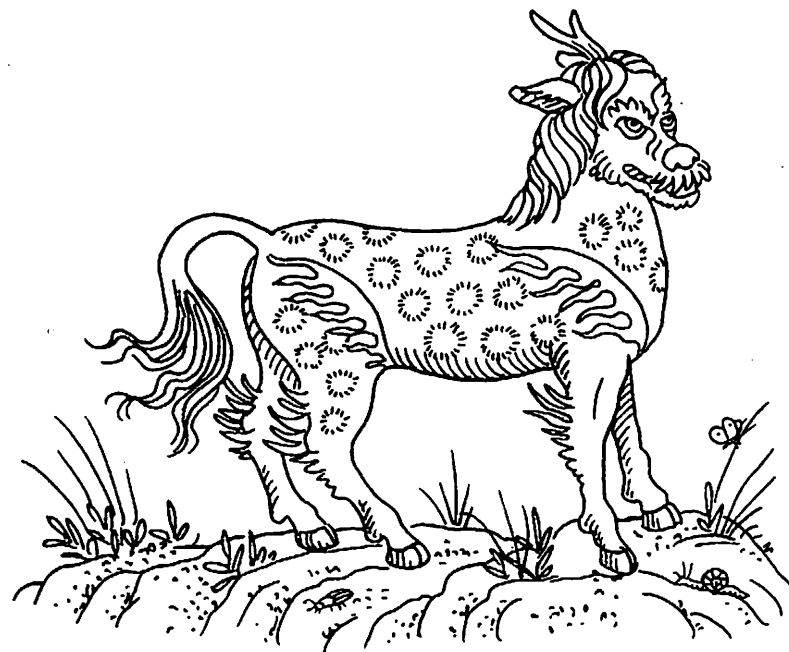
No sooner had she stepped in the footprint than the ki-lin himself appeared beside her, knelt, and dropped at her feet a piece of jade. When she picked this up she saw carved upon it an inscription:

"The son of the essence of water shall succeed to the withering Chou (the house then reigning) and be a throneless king."

The son who was in time born to this woman was Kung Fu Sze, or Confucius, the greatest philosopher of China and beyond doubt a throneless king, one whose influence has long overshadowed that of the most powerful emperors. And the ki-lin who thus played a part in the beginning of his life was also to play a part in his death.

Confucius lived for many years. In his old age he set himself to write a history of his native state of Lü, a history he called the "Spring and Autumn Annals" and in which he tried to show how his principles of conduct should be applied both to the government of the state and to the life of the individual. It was when this work was nearly finished that a ki-lin was seen by Duke Ngai of Lü during a hunting expedition. News of this was brought to Confucius, and the sage was asked to give his opinion on its possible origin.

Confucius was well aware of the usual reasons for the appearance of a unicorn. At the same time he had seen too much of the corruption and decay of the state and empire,



the chaos, the misery that were a part of his era, to think that now the unicorn could come as a sign of man's perfection. It might, however, still herald the death of a great man. Modest though the sage may have been, he had no doubt of the importance of his teaching, and one can imagine his thoughts when he heard that the virtuous ki-lin had been seen again.

"For whom have you come?" he is reported to have exclaimed, "for whom?" And as he turned away, he said sadly, "My teaching is ended."

It was two years before Confucius died, but he wrote nothing more and the "Spring and Autumn Annals" close with the record of the ki-lin's appearance. A poem of the same date is ascribed to him:

*"In the age of T'ang and Yü the lin and the
Feng (phoenix) walked abroad.
Now when it is not their time they come;
And what do they seek?
The lin—the lin—my heart is sad."*

The unicorn appeared once more in the courts of the Son of Heaven when the Han emperor Wu Ti caught a glimpse of a pure white ki-lin in the second century B.C. Wu Ti built a special gallery in the palace in honor of this vision, hoping that the creature would return once more to testify to the prosperity and wisdom of his rule, but the ki-lin had vanished, this time for good. Many a later emperor prayed for its appearance, many a courtier assured his monarch that the unicorn must have blessed his reign; the elusive ki-lin itself was not seen.

That did not mean that it was forgotten. The longing of the kings of the Middle Kingdom for a sign of approval, an omen from the ki-lin, persisted through the years.

Early in the fifteenth century a Chinese merchant ship landed on the coast of East Africa, and what was the astonishment of its crew to hear of the existence there of an animal called, in Somali, the girin, and pronounced almost exactly as the Chinese pronounce ki-lin. This creature had the body of a deer, a long neck, and bony protuberances on its forehead; it was of gentle disposition and would harm no other creature. Here at last, it seemed, was the missing ki-lin. The delighted sailors made haste to sail for China, carrying with them a specimen of the rare creature.

So the first giraffe came to Peking and was hailed as the ki-lin of ancient glory, the sign of a virtuous rule. The emperor received it with due ceremony and humility. Being of modest character and but recently come to the throne, he

announced without hesitation that this visitation must be due to the overwhelming virtue of his father Yung Loh. And since Yung Loh was indeed one of China's greatest emperors, and the builder of Peking, it may be that this last appearance of the ki-lin, even though in the form of a giraffe (and it is curious that the Japanese use the Chinese word ki-lin, which they pronounce kirin, for the giraffe) was appropriate.

Reports of the unicorn first reached Europe from the East. In 416 B.C. a Greek physician named Ctesias went to the court of Darius II, king of Persia, and lived there as court physician for seventeen years. On his return he wrote a history of Persia and of the countries that lie beyond. It is on this work that most early European accounts of the unicorn are based, for he tells that in India live wild white asses, too swift for capture, with a single horn a foot and a half in length, and that from this horn can be made drinking cups that will detect the presence of poison.

From this first report the story grew, fed by the tales of travelers who spoke in all good faith of what had been told them, and by the learned arguments of the naturalists as to the exact length and color of the horn, the shape of the feet, the tail, the head of this animal whose being no one had reason to deny. Pliny described it as a ferocious beast similar to a horse but with the head of a deer, the feet of an elephant and a single black horn sprouting from its forehead, which could not be taken alive; Aristotle devoted only a small amount of space to it, but did not question its existence.

What was the origin of the story? There have been many explanations, all of them possible and perhaps all to some extent true. The single horn of the rhinoceros, long used by the Chinese as a preventive against poison, may have suggested the existence of a one-horned animal to those who

had not seen the rhinoceros itself. (The Chinese, however, never confused their ki-lin with the rhinoceros, and never claimed any magic properties for the horn of the former.) The Arabs, seeing ivory and rhinoceros horn superbly carved by the Chinese with figures and animals and symbols so tiny that it seemed incredible the hand of man could do such work, used to say that the horn of the unicorn, if peeled, was found to be covered with magic carvings.

Another theory is that it was the sight of the oryx, the swift antelope so seldom approached by man, with its long, slender horns that seem to be but one horn when they are seen from afar or in profile, which was responsible for the unicorn. The finding of individual horns, which were perhaps carried home in triumph by travelers from little known parts of the world, would help to convince the sceptics. Similarly foreigners, gazing with awe at the great bas-reliefs carved on the walls of Babylon and Nineveh and Persepolis, may have thought that the bulls shown there in profile, with one horn completely hiding the other, represented an unknown and single-horned species. If this seems farfetched, one has only to see the sculptures from Persepolis now in the Louvre; there stands the unicorn-bull, a unicorn beyond any doubt.

The myth of the unicorn might have died away quietly in Europe had it not been for an accident. About the second century B.C. seventy Hebrew scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek for the first time. In the original work they came across several references to an animal called by the Hebrew word R'em, a creature obviously wild and of great size and strength. Both the "horn" and "horns" of the R'em are mentioned. Yet whether by mistake or because they saw in the characteristics of the unknown R'em that unicorn

of which they had heard tell, the seventy translated the word R'em as *monokeros*, or the one-horned. This was inevitably followed in all the later versions, becoming unicornus in Latin, Einhorn in German, licorne in French, unicorn in the English Bible. (It seems agreed that the R'em was actually the now extinct urus or aurochs, a large and extremely ferocious wild ox, but this the seventy could not know.) The Psalmist sings:

"But my horn thou shalt exalt like the horn of a unicorn," and, again, in a mood of mingled entreaty and command, "Save me from the lion's mouth: thou hast saved me also from the horns of the unicorns," while the strength and unmanageableness of the supposed beast are best seen when the Lord asks Job:

"Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib? Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee?"

How then could anyone deny the existence of this creature? Here certainly was proof of its being. It was named in the Bible, mentioned by God. Some argued that the unicorn, being too large to enter Noah's Ark, had perished in the great Flood and therefore no longer existed, but others replied that this was heresy and that what God had created could not cease to be; if the unicorn had been too large for the Ark it had undoubtedly swum behind it, with a rope round its horn. (One version of the unicorn legend seems to have been that only one such creature existed at a time; a mediaeval tapestry shows Adam naming all the animals as they appear before him and, although there is a pair of every other beast, they are led by a single unicorn.)

During the Middle Ages belief in the unicorn grew, and the authorities were more or less agreed on his appearance

and his habits. He was a fierce and solitary animal, they said, gentle only at mating time. His strength and the peculiar purity of his nature both lay mainly in the horn. When in danger he could throw himself from any height and land, unhurt, on the point of this horn. And if, as sometimes happened, a serpent had poisoned the water hole where other animals were wont to quench their thirst, so that they dared not drink, the unicorn had only to stir the waters of the pool with his horn and they immediately became sweet and pure again. Because he could thus counteract the poison of the serpent, the evil one, and because of his very purity of nature (like that of his cousin the ki-lin), the unicorn was a common mediaeval symbol of Christ.

There was only one way in which a unicorn could be captured. The strongest hunter, the most subtle trap could not hold him. But if a virgin, crowned with flowers and fragrant with perfume, would go into the forest and wait there alone, the unicorn would come and kneel beside her and lay his horn in her lap, ready to follow her wherever she might go. Alas, the trust of the unicorn in the maiden's innocence was all too often misplaced, for she would lead him straight to the ambush where the hunters lay waiting. Sometimes, even, one of the latter would disguise himself as a maiden, his sword hidden beneath long robes, and so take the unicorn, though if the poor beast was gullible enough to be thus deceived he can hardly have been as elusive as reputed.

The unicorn was most renowned for the miraculous power against poison supposedly possessed by its horn. The rich had drinking cups made of unicorn horn, the poor had small pieces with which to test their food and drink, for it was firmly believed that even the tiniest fragment would sweat and change color in the presence of poison, and two famous

horns which are still in St. Mark's in Venice are worn thin from innumerable scrapings. Alicorn, or unicorn's horn, was an essential item of the apothecaries' stock until the eighteenth century, and at one time powdered horn was valued at ten times its weight in gold, while whole horns were almost beyond price. There were famous horns: one kept in a dark vault in the French Cathedral of St. Denis, so potent that even the water in which it had been steeped would cure the sick; one included in the inventory of the treasure of Charles I; and another, or perhaps the same, that was seen at Windsor Castle by travelers to the court of Queen Elizabeth and valued at £100,000.

The alicorn was undoubtedly the most valued charm against poison, and the one in which belief was slowest to die, but it was by no means the only one. The toadstone, a gem supposedly taken from the head of a living toad, the gryphon's claw, the stag's horn, the horned snake, and horns of all kinds were used in the same way. (The belief in the prophylactic value of horns is world-wide among primitive peoples; travelers to the New World in the sixteenth century found the natives of various widely scattered tribes wearing bits of horn as amulets, and thereupon reported the existence of the unicorn in America.) Reading some of the instructions for procuring and utilizing these magic talismans, one wonders whether in those days men thought of anything except how to poison their fellow men, and at the same time themselves avoid being poisoned. Certainly those of power and wealth had need to take precautions against the envy of the less fortunate. But it was more than that. The alicorn was thought to prevent—and, even more important, to cure—accidental poisoning, disease, and illness from tainted meat or fish or fruit; in those days when little was known of the

causes of poisoning, when there was no refrigeration and little sanitation, such a charm was indeed worth far more than gold.

Inevitably, there were times when the horn had no effect and the victim of poisoning died just the same. This cast no discredit on the power of the true alicorn; it was simply assumed that the horn used had been a fake. Frauds were plentiful, which was hardly surprising with a commodity so valuable, and there were secret recipes for softening ivory and walrus tusks so that they could be bent straight and sold as unicorn's horn; the powder could easily be manufactured from limestone, or burned or powdered horns of any kind. There were of course also tests intended to detect these fakes; scorpions placed in water in a covered dish which held a true alicorn should be dead in a few hours (presumably from drowning), while spiders and other poisonous insects did not dare to cross a line drawn on the ground with the true horn.

As we have seen, the horn of the rhinoceros or "sword-cow" was believed in the Far East to have this same power against poison, and the first "genuine" European alicorns were undoubtedly rhinoceros horns. But about the twelfth century sailors and fishermen in arctic waters began to pick up on remote shores horns of ivory, which they concluded must certainly be the horns of unicorns. From what other source could these single horns, long, tapering, and wreathed with a spiral pattern, have come? The sailors and traders sold them to the apothecaries and merchants, the latter to their customers, all in good faith; the certainty that the unicorn existed was strengthened by these mysterious discoveries. (One might wonder why, if the unicorn lived in India, its horns were found only in the Arctic, but this was

a small detail to set against the weight of evidence in favor of the unicorn.)

These peculiar horns actually came from a creature stranger than ever the unicorn was thought to be: the narwhal, sometimes called a sea unicorn. The narwhal is a small whale, found only in the northern seas. In its upper jaw two teeth lie side by side and, in the female and in the case of the male's right tooth, these remain hidden in a cavity and develop no further. But the left tooth of the male grows straight out through its upper lip and continues to grow longer and longer, spiralling as it does so, until it is often more than half the length of the creature itself; a narwhal twelve feet long will develop a tusk of seven or eight feet. The tusk is of fine ivory, though hollow, as indeed it would have to be if the poor narwhal is not to be weighed down by his decorative but apparently quite useless tooth. Here indeed was a horn fit for the unicorn of legend, and from that time on nearly all alicorns came from the narwhal.

The unicorn has long been a favorite heraldic device, especially as a supporter. In British heraldry it figures in the arms of the Apothecaries Society and of the Goldsmiths, but it is best known as the sinister supporter of the royal coat of arms, where it stands in opposition to the lion. It assumed that position at the time of the union between Scotland and England in 1707, for a unicorn had been the principal supporter of the arms of Scotland for several centuries before that, even as the lion had been of those of England.

An old nursery rhyme tells how

*"The lion and the unicorn
Were fighting for the crown;
The lion beat the unicorn
All around the town . . ."*

and it is sometimes thought that it was the position of these two royal beasts opposite each other in the coat of arms that suggested the verse; that their apparent rivalry might have been symbolic of that which had previously existed between England and Scotland. But, strangely enough, the enmity between lion and unicorn is one of the oldest concepts found in mythology. They already figure together in the design of



a box found in Ur of the Chaldees, the birthplace of the patriarch Abraham. They face one another on the sculptured walls of Chaldean courtyards, the lion and that one-horned bull which is the supposed prototype of the unicorn, rearing up on their hind legs as though just about to meet in fierce combat. An Egyptian papyrus of Roman date shows the lion and the one-horned bull playing chess.

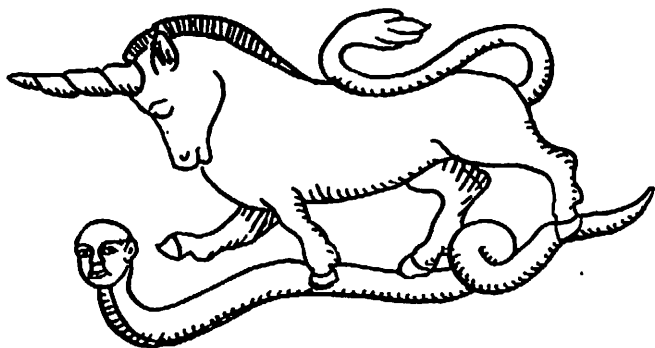
The lion is always victorious in these battles, apparently even in the chess game. And it seems certain that the eternal conflict of lion and unicorn expresses some contest which early man thought to see in the ways of nature. The two great beasts were protagonists in some primeval struggle the meaning of which we can only guess.

One explanation may be sought in astronomy. Some four or five thousand years ago, when Chaldean star-gazers were first shaping the stars of the Zodiac into the constellations we know today, the constellation of Leo the Lion stood at the summer solstice and symbolized the heat and strength of summer. In the same way Taurus the Bull marked the spring equinox and the gentleness of spring. Thus it could reasonably be said that the lion of summer waged an annual battle with the unicorn of spring (remembering that the bull, seen in profile, was the unicorn), and that spring must inevitably be overcome by summer.

Another possible origin for the enmity of the two great beasts is suggested by an old legend which tells how the unicorn once chased the lion far across the skies. He seemed to be gaining on his prey, until at length the wily lion hid himself behind a tree. The unicorn charged on, plunged his horn straight into the tree, and was caught fast, while the lion circled round behind and slew the hapless beast before he could free himself. This strange and apparently very ancient tale is thought to preserve a primitive belief in the rivalry between sun and moon. The sun as it sets seems to flee from the pursuing moon, but the moon sets in its turn and is then caught in the tree of darkness, that great tree which the Egyptians and others believed to have its roots in the underworld and whose spreading branches they believed nightly darkened the earth. While the moon is still entangled by the darkness, the sun comes round behind it and rises again in full strength.

Certainly the lion in mythology is a solar symbol, and it seems very likely that the unicorn originated as a lunar animal, for it is often shown on coins and seals beside the crescent moon. Both moon and unicorn are thought to be of a

cold, remote nature, and both are particularly characterized by their purity and gentleness. It is strange, too, that the two horns of the new moon are at the same time but a single horn. In fact, although the relationship is by no means so obvious as in the case of the phoenix and the sun, it may well be that the unicorn was originally simply a creature of the moon and that the earliest descriptions of it were attempts to express the nature of the moon rather than descriptions of a living animal.



The Tengu, Garuda, and the T'ien Kou

ONE OF THE CLASSICS of Japanese history is the story of the long struggle between the Taira and the Minamoto clans. This was more than a fight to determine which family was the more powerful and would therefore rule the country; it was a feud, carried on with intense hatred and without pity. Thus when Kiyomori, leader of the Taira clan, had killed Yoshitomo, chief of the Minamotos, in battle, he set out to destroy every male relative and every child of Yoshitomo and wreck the power of the clan forever. He was only deterred from this when the widow of Yoshitomo