The Unicorn

By Morris Marples

PROBABLY there is no one alive to-day who believes in the unicorn. The myth has been exploded, as the phrase goes, and the unicorn, familiar though it is in heraldry, is dead.

It always seems to me that we lose a great deal by the explosion of myths—just as we lose a great deal by growing up. We know too much nowadays. The only thing left for us is to put together again sorrowfully the exploded myths in which our ancestors believed, and try to recapture something of their point of view.

The unicorn once had a tremendous vogue. It probably came to England with the Renaissance, and every Elizabethan believed in it. Even so late as 1886 a writer on mythical monsters thought "that the existence or non-existence of this remarkable animal remains a debatable question," which shows how firmly rooted the legend had become. It may have come into Europe from the East; it may be of native European growth; no one can say.

The first European writer who mentions a one-horned animal is not Herodotus, as we should expect, but Aristotle. He is uncompromisingly scientific about it, and gives two examples: the Indian ass and the oryx. Probably there were no unicorn legends known to the Greek world, or we should have found them in Herodotus.

It is rather surprising that Aristotle should make a mistake about the oryx, which even Herodotus knew to have two horns. But it was a mistake often made in later times, and, at any rate, suggests one possible origin of the unicorn fable, namely, an oryx seen in profile. The horned ass is also mentioned by Herodotus, though he does not specify the number of horns. I do not know whether it has any foundation in fact.

The first definite description of the unicorn is probably that found in Pliny the naturalist (A.D. 23), which I here quote in Philemon Holland's delightful translation: "The most fell and furious beast of all other is the

Licorne or Monoceros: his body resembles a horse, his head a stag, his feet an Elephant, his taile a bore; he loweth after an hideous manner, one black horne he hath in the mids of his forehead, bearing out two cubits in length: by report, this wild beast cannot possibly be caught alive." But most of the medieval unicorn lore finds its origin in the famous "Physiologus."

This strange work was a product of second-century Christianity, and written originally in Greek. It contained many amusing stories about all kinds of real and imaginary creatures, and its object was to show how God's purpose is made manifest by means of symbols in the world of Nature. Besides being in itself entertaining, the "Physiologus" throws a flood of light on the happy credulity of the early Christian, and the ingenuity of his pastors and masters, who were guilty, so it seems, of falsifying Nature to bolster up their creed. It had a tremendous popularity, lasting for several centuries, and was copied, enlarged, and translated into every European language. The volumes of animal lore thus derived from the original "Physiologus" are the well-known "bestiaries." Everyone was familiar with the stories contained in them. The church carvings of the period are full of them, and they seem to have rivalled the Scriptures themselves in popularity.

The "Physiologus" then is responsible for the wide distribution of the unicorn legend through medieval Europe. He may have borrowed from Pliny in the beginning, but he certainly added a great many details to the story on his own account; it is impossible to say whether he invented them deliberately, or derived them from some unknown, perhaps Eastern, source.

We have seen that Pliny likened the unicorn to a horse, but the "Physiologus" declares that it resembles a goat in size. Both these traditions have survived: sometimes the unicorn is big and fierce, sometimes small and very swift, for all were agreed that for one reason or another it could not be captured in any ordinary way. How it could be captured any bestiary will tell us.

Ferocious and wary as it was, the unicorn had an affection for maidens, and the hunters, so we are told, used to take advantage of this weakness, and send a

maiden—or a man disguised as a maiden—into the wood where the unicorn lived. She would sit down and wait, and presently the unicorn would emerge timidly, lay its head in her lap, and fall asleep : or, if it were of the small variety, it would " spring into her lap," in the words of the " Physiologus," and so fall asleep. Then the hunters crept up and cut off the precious horn before the animal had time to escape, leaving it as weak as Samson bereft of his hair.

In another version of the story the maiden leads the unicorn peaceably to the king's palace, where it was perhaps kept " for exhibition of its strength and exposed in combats and festivals," like certain unicorns mentioned by Ælian.

The legend of the maiden and the unicorn was a very favourite one for illustration. Blue, red, mauve, or black unicorns with huge horns, and bodies like cart-horses, are to be seen in the bestiaries making advances to grotesque maidens; while the same subject occurs frequently in church carvings, especially on the misereres of cathedrals. This was because it had an appropriate symbolical meaning. The unicorn represented Christ, and the maiden or virgin his mother : its capture and death symbolized Christ's capture and death at the hands of the Jews, and its small size was supposed to be a symbol of Christ's humility. All this may seem very far-fetched, but it is typical of the " Physiologus." The importance of the unicorn symbolically is put very succinctly in an old French bestiary :—

> Monoceros est beste,
> Une corne a en la tête,
> Cette beste en verité nous signifie Dieu.

There was one other possible way of catching a unicorn, which we find in Grimm's fairy tale of the Brave Little Tailor. The king in this story sent the tailor, who wished to marry his daughter, to catch a unicorn alive, hoping thus to get rid of him. But the tailor was not to be outdone. When the unicorn charged him he dodged behind a tree, and the animal's horn became firmly fixed in the trunk, so that the tailor was able to cut it off with his axe and lead the unicorn before the astonished king.

A lion in Spenser's "Faerie Queene" is described as adopting the same tactics :—

> Like as a Lyon, whose imperiall powre
> A prowd rebellious Unicorne defies,
> T'avoide the rash assault and wrathfull stowre
> Of his fiers foe, him to a trees aplies,
> And when him running in full course he spies,
> He slips aside; the whiles that furious beast
> His precious horne, sought of his enemies,
> Strikes in the stocks, ne thence can be releast,
> But to the mighty victour yields a bounteous feast.

No one seems to know what the unicorn was supposed to eat, though Sir Thomas Browne very sagaciously remarks that it could not possibly feed off the ground with a horn so placed. But it certainly lived in forests, so perhaps we should be justified in assuming that it browsed upon the foliage of trees. It was said to be a very solitary beast, and to have an antipathy to its own kind, so that two unicorns could not meet without fighting. It seems also to have been specially hostile to the lion, as in Spenser's stanza, and in the well-known verse about the Royal Arms :—

> The Lion and the Unicorn were fighting for the crown;
> The Lion beat the Unicorn and sent him out of town.

The same motif is said to be found even in an Egyptian papyrus, where the two rivals are depicted playing draughts, and the lion is pocketing the winnings. Another of the unicorn's enemies was the elephant, which it was said to attack in the stomach with its horn. This detail was probably derived from Pliny, who describes the rhinoceros attacking the elephant in this way.

Another use of the horn is related by Cosmas, a sixth-century Alexandrian merchant. He tells how the unicorn when pursued, throws itself from a cliff and escapes unhurt by landing on its horn, which acts as a shock-absorber. The story has also been told of the ibex.

The horn also had the remarkable power of neutralizing poison, which was indeed its chief claim to fame. Before drinking from a pond containing venomous reptiles, the unicorn would dip in its horn to purify the water, and the other animals used to take advantage of this useful habit so that they might drink in safety. The "Physiologus" describes it as follows:—"Before they assemble themselves

comes the snake and casts her poison on the water. And the beasts when they observe the poison dare not drink, but wait for the Unicorn. He comes and goes straight into the lake and makes the sign of the Cross with his horn, and thereupon the poison becomes harmless and all those beasts drink."

It is not surprising that the horn was in great demand among men. Travellers liked to carry a piece, so that they could drink from wayside ponds in safety, while kings and other powerful but unpopular people had cups made of unicorn's horn, so as to be free from the fear of poisoned wine. No doubt there was a considerable traffic in the commodity. But it was often suspected—not without cause, perhaps—that a great deal of the so-called unicorn's horn was not genuine. There is extant a formula by which it could be tested: "For experience of the Unicorn's horn to know whether it be right or not: put silk upon a burning coal, and upon the silk the aforesaid horn, and if so be that it be true, the silk wil not be a whit consumed." Let us hope that this helped people to avoid being swindled.

In Sir Thomas Browne's day many supposed unicorn's horns were on view at various places, and some even exist to-day, though they generally turn out to be the horns of narwhals, or sea unicorns, as Sir Thomas Browne calls them. One at St. Denis, near Paris, "had wreathy spires and chocleary turnings about it"; and Albertus Magnus described one which was "ten feet long and at the base about thirteen inches compass," which, if genuine, must have belonged to a truly terrible monster! At Queen Elizabeth's court there was a unicorn's horn said to be worth £10,000; the Queen herself did not think it a genuine one.

The unicorn legend is not confined to Europe. Africa, India, China, and Japan all have their myths of one-horned animals, and the story seems as universal as that of the Phœnix. It is easy to see how such a myth might start in any given instance; but it is not easy to see why the idea of a one-horned animal has had such a widespread fascination for mankind—why the most diverse races have independently made it the subject of legend. That, like the distribution of many other myths, must always remain a fascinating mystery.