



Lore of the Unicorn

Odell Shepard

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"Gradually, however, I found myself moving out into a purer air along a path not entirely strange even then, for the unicorn's horn was long the chief defense against poison of those who could pay the huge prices at which it was held. And then several other questions arose: How did this horn acquire its great reputation? How was it supposed to act in detecting poison? How could it maintain its prestige while the princes and dukes of Italy who owned it were dying on every hand suddenly and from no apparent cause? Where did these horns come from, and what was the nature of the traffic that purveyed them?"

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I. THE GORGEOUS EAST

CHAPTER II. THE HOLY HUNT

CHAPTER III. SHAPING FANTASIES

CHAPTER IV. EAST AND WEST

CHAPTER V. THE TREASURE OF HIS BROW

CHAPTER VI. THE BATTLE OF BOOKS

CHAPTER VII. RUMOURS

CHAPTER VIII. CONJECTURES

CHAPTER IX. CERTAINTIES

CHAPTER X. REFLECTIONS

"The lore of the unicorn is enormous in range and variety, not only because of the great expanse of time it covers but because it involves so many different departments of knowledge, and the literature dealing specifically with the topic is surprisingly extensive. Like most of my predecessors, I have hunted the unicorn chiefly in libraries, realizing the delightful absurdity of the task quite as fully as any one could point it out to me. A zoologist would have written on my topic a different and probably a shorter book, but for me the unicorn is interesting almost entirely as a denizen of "the Monarch Thought's dominions". Whether there is or is not an actual unicorn--and this is one of the questions upon which I shall merely quote the opinions of others--he cannot possibly be so fascinating or so important as the things men have dreamed and thought and written about him. A dream, if it is no more than that, of such great age and beauty as this of the unicorn, is far more worthy of consideration than the question whether we shall have one species more or less in the earth's fauna. And the dream, at any rate, is an unquestionable fact, a phenomenon of the mind; it has grown like a tree, striking deep roots in thought and spreading huge boughs against our mental sky."

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