

## Feeding Time

By Robert Sheckley

Treggis felt considerably relieved when the owner of the bookstore went front to wait upon another customer. After all, it was essentially nerve-racking, to have a stooped, bespectacled, fawning old man constantly at one's shoulder, peering at the page one was glancing at, pointing here and there with a gnarled, dirty finger, obsequiously wiping dust from the shelves with a tobacco-stained handkerchief. To say nothing of the exquisite boredom of listening to the fellow's cackling, high-pitched reminiscences.

Undoubtedly he meant well, but really, there was a limit. One couldn't do much more than smile politely and hope that the little bell over the front of the store would tinkle—as it had.

Treggis moved toward the back of the store, hoping the disgusting little man wouldn't try to search him out. He passed half a hundred Greek titles, then the popular sciences section. Next, in a strange jumble of titles and authors, he passed Edgar Rice Burroughs, Anthony Trollope, Theosophy, and the poems of Longfellow. The farther back he went the deeper the dust became, the fewer the naked light bulbs suspended above the corridor, the higher the piles of moldy, dog-eared books.

It was really a splendid old place, and for the life of him Treggis couldn't understand how he had missed it before. Bookstores were his sole pleasure in life. He spent all his free hours in them, wandering happily through the stacks.

Of course, he was just interested in certain types of books.

At the end of the high ramp of books there were three more corridors, branching off at absurd angles. Treggis followed the center path, reflecting that the bookstore hadn't seemed so large from the outside; just a door half-hidden between two buildings, with an old hand-lettered sign in its upper panel. But then, these old stores were deceptive, often extending to nearly half a block in depth.

At the end of this corridor two more book-trails split off. Choosing the one on the left, Treggis started reading titles, casually scanning them up and down with a practiced glance. He was in no

hurry; he could, if he wished, spend the rest of the day here—to say nothing of the night.

He had shuffled eight or ten feet down the corridor before one title struck him. He went back to it.

It was a small, black-covered book, old, but with that ageless look that some books have. Its edges were worn, and the print on the cover was faded.

"Well, what do you know," Treggis murmured softly.

The cover read: *Care and Feeding of the Gryphon*. And beneath that, in smaller print: *Advice to the Keeper*.

A gryphon, he knew, was a mythological monster, half lion and half eagle.

"Well, now," Treggis said to himself. "Let's see now." He opened the book and began reading the table of contents.

The headings went: 1. *Species of Gryphon*. 2. *A Short History of Gryphonology*. 3. *Subspecies of Gryphon*. 4. *Food for the Gryphon*. 5. *Constructing a Natural Habitat for the Gryphon*. 6. *The Gryphon During Moult Season*. 7. *The Gryphon and . . .*

He closed the book.

"This," he told himself, "is decidedly—well, unusual." He flipped through the book, reading a sentence here and there. His first thought, that the book was one of the "unnatural" natural history compilations so dear to the Elizabethan heart, was clearly wrong. The book wasn't old enough; and there was nothing euphuistic in the writing, no balanced sentence structure, ingenious antithesis and the like. It was straightforward, clean-cut, concise. Treggis flipped through a few more pages and came upon this:

"The sole diet of the Gryphon is young virgins. Feeding time is once a month, and care should be exercised—"

He closed the book again. The sentence set up a train of thought all its own. He banished it with a blush and looked again at the shelf, hoping to find more books of the same type. Something like *A Short History of the Affairs of the Sirens*, or perhaps *The Proper Breeding of Minotaurs*. But there was nothing even remotely like it. Not on that shelf nor any other, as far as he could tell.

"Find anything?" a voice at his shoulder asked. Treggis gulped, smiled, and held out the black-covered old book.

"Oh yes," the old man said, wiping dust from the cover. "Quite a rare book, this."

"Oh, is it?" murmured Treggis.

"Gryphons," the old man mused, flipping through the book, "are quite rare. Quite a rare species of—animal," he finished, after a moment's thought. "A dollar-fifty for this book, sir."

Treggis left with his possession clutched under his thin right arm. He made straight for his room. It wasn't every day that one bought a book on the *Care and Feeding of Gryphons*.

Treggis' room bore a striking resemblance to a secondhand bookstore. There was the same lack of space, the same film of gray dust over everything, the same vaguely arranged chaos of titles, authors, and types. Treggis didn't stop to gloat over his treasures. His faded *Libidinous Verses* passed unnoticed. Quite unceremoniously he pushed the *Psychopathia Sexualis* from his armchair, sat down and began to read.

There was quite a lot to the care and feeding of the gryphon. One wouldn't think that a creature half lion and half eagle would be so touchy. There was also an interesting amplification of the eating habits of the gryphon. And other information. For pure enjoyment, the gryphon book was easily as good as the Havelock Ellis lectures on sex, formerly his favorite.

Toward the end, there were full instructions on how to get to the zoo. The instructions were, to say the least, unique.

It was a good ways past midnight when Treggis closed the book. What a deal of strange information there was between those two black covers! One sentence in particular he couldn't get out of his head:

“The sole diet of the gryphon is young virgins.”

That bothered him. It didn't seem fair, somehow.

After a while he opened the book again to the *Instructions for Getting to the Zoo*.

Decidedly strange they were. And yet, not too difficult. Not requiring, certainly, too much physical exertion. Just a few words, a few motions. Treggis realized suddenly how onerous his bank clerk's job was. A stupid waste of eight good hours a day, no matter how one looked at it. How much more interesting to be a keeper in charge of the gryphon. To use the special ointments during moulting season, to answer questions about gryphonology. To be in charge of feeding. “The sole diet . . .”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” Treggis mumbled rapidly, pacing the floor of his narrow room. “A hoax—but might as well try out the instructions. For a laugh.”

He laughed hollowly.

There was no blinding flash, no clap of thunder, but Treggis was nevertheless transported, instantaneously so it seemed, to a place. He staggered for a moment, then regained his balance and opened

his eyes. The sunlight was blinding. Looking around, he could see that someone had done a very good job of constructing *The Natural Habitat of the Gryphon*.

Treggis walked forward, holding himself quite well considering the trembling in his ankles, knees, and stomach. Then he saw the gryphon.

At the same time the gryphon saw him.

Slowly at first, then with ever-gaining momentum, the gryphon advanced on him. The great eagle's wings opened, the talons extended, and the gryphon leaped, or sailed, forward.

Treggis tried to jump out of the way in a single uncontrollable shudder. The gryphon came at him, huge and golden in the sun, and Treggis screamed desperately, "No, no! The sole diet of the gryphon is young—"

Then he screamed again in full realization as the talons seized him.