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Illustrator  
SUMMERS

*The bald eagle and the whooping crane are vanishing. Songbirds are dying by the millions.*

*In Africa, the herds thin out each year. And have you been to the zoo lately?*

# Possible to Rue

By PIERS ANTHONY

I WANT a Pegasus, Daddy," Junior greeted him at the door, his curly blond head bobbing with excitement. "A small one, with white fluttery wings and an aerodynamic tail and—"

"You shall have it, son," Daddy said warmly, absent-mindedly stripping off jacket and tie. Next week was Bradley Newton, Jr.'s sixth birthday, and Bradley, Senior had promised a copy of *Now We Are Six* and a pet for his very own. Newton was a man of means, so that this was no empty pledge. He felt he owed it to the boy, to make up in some

token the sorrow of Mrs. N's untimely departure.

He eased himself into the upholstered chair, vaguely pleased that his son showed such imagination. Another child would have demanded something commonplace, like a mongrel or a Shetland pony. But a pegasus now—

"Do you mean the winged horse, son?" Newton inquired, a thin needle of doubt poking into his complacency.

"That's right, Daddy," Junior said brightly. "But it will have to be a very small one, because I want a pegasus that can really

fly. A full grown animal's wings are non-functional because the proportionate wing span is insufficient to get it off the ground."

"I understand, son," Newton said quickly. "A small one." People had laughed when he had insisted that Junior's nurse have a graduate degree in general science. Fortunately he had been able to obtain one inexpensively by hiring her away from the school board. At this moment he regretted that it was her day off; Junior could be very single-minded.

"Look, son," he temporized. "I'm not sure I know where to buy a horse like that. And you'll have to know how to feed it and care for it, otherwise it would get sick and die. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

The boy pondered. "You're right, Daddy," he said at last. "We would be well advised to look it up."

"Look it up?"

"In the encyclopedia, Daddy. Haven't you always told me that it was an authoritative factual reference?"

The light dawned. Junior believed in the encyclopedia. "My very words, Son. Let's look it up and see what it says about . . . let's see . . . here's *Opinion to Possibility* . . . should be in this volume. Yes." He found the place and read aloud: "'Pegasus—Horse with wings which

sprang from the blood of the Gorgon Medusa after Perseus cut off her head.'"

JUNIOR's little mouth dropped open. "That has got to be figurative," he pronounced. "Horses are not created from—"

"'. . . a creature of Greek mythology,'" Newton finished victoriously.

Junior digested that. "You mean, it doesn't exist," he said dispiritedly. Then he brightened. "Daddy, if I ask for something that does exist, then can I have it for a pet?"

"Certainly, Son. We'll just look it up here, and if the book says it's real, we'll go out and get one. I think that's a fair bargain."

"A unicorn," Junior said.

Newton restrained a smile. He reached for the volume marked *Trust to Wary* and flipped the pages. "'Unicorn—A mythological creature resembling a horse —'" he began.

Junior looked at him suspiciously. "Next year I'm going to school and learn to read for myself," he muttered. "You are alleging that there is no such animal?"

"That's what the book says, Son—honest."

The boy looked dubious, but decided not to make an issue of it. "All right—let's try a zebra." He watched while Newton pulled out *Watchful to Indices*. "It's

only fair to warn you, Daddy," he said ominously, "that there is a picture of one on the last page of my alphabet book."

"I'll read you just exactly what it says, Son," Newton said defensively. "Here it is: 'Zebra—A striped horse-like animal reputed to have lived in Africa. Common in European and American legend, although entirely mythical—'"

"Now you're making that up," Junior accused angrily. "I've got a picture."

"But Son—I thought it was real myself. I've never seen a zebra, but I thought—look. You have a picture of a ghost too, don't you? But you know that's not real."

There was a hard set to Junior's jaw. "The examples are not analogous. Spirits are preternatural—"

"Why don't we try another animal?" Newton cut in. "We can come back to the zebra later."

"Mule," Junior said sullenly.

Newton reddened, then realized that the boy was not being personal. He withdrew the volume covering *Morphine to Opiate* silently. He was somewhat shaken up by the turn events had taken. Imagine spending all his life believing in an animal that didn't exist. Yet of course it was stupid to swear by a horse with prison stripes. . . .

"'Mule,'" he read. "'The off-

spring of the mare and the male ass. A very large, strong hybrid, sure footed with remarkable sagacity. A creature of folklore, although, like the unicorn and zebra, widely accepted by the credulous. . . .'"

His son looked at him. "Horse," he said.

Newton somewhat warily opened *Hoax to Imaginary*. He was glad he wasn't credulous himself. "Right you are, Son. 'Horse—A fabled hoofed creature prevalent in mythology. A very fleet four-footed animal complete with flowing mane, hairy tail and benevolent disposition. Metallic shoes supposedly worn by the animal are valued as good luck charms, in much the same manner as the unicorn's horn—'"

JUNIOR clouded up dangerously. "Now wait a minute, Son," Newton spluttered. "I know that's wrong. I've seen horses myself. Why, they use them in TV westerns—"

"The reasoning is specious," Junior muttered but his heart wasn't in it.

"Look, Son—I'll prove it. I'll call the race track. I used to place—I mean, I used to go there to see the horses. Maybe they'll let us visit the stables." Newton dialed with a quivering finger; spoke into the phone. A brief frustrated interchange later he

slammed the receiver down again. "They race dogs now," he said.

He fumbled through the yellow pages, refusing to let himself think. The book skipped rebelliously from *Homes* to *Hospital*. He rattled the bar for the operator to demand the number of the nearest horse farm, then angrily dialed "0"; after some confusion he ended up talking to "Horsepower, Inc.", a tractor dealer.

Junior surveyed the proceedings with profound disgust. "Me-thinks the queen protests too much," he quoted sweetly.

In desperation, Newton called a neighbor. "Listen, Sam—do you know anybody around here who owns a horse? I promised my boy I'd show him one today. . . ."

Sam's laughter echoed back over the wire. "You're a card,

Brad. Horses, yet. Do you teach him to believe in fairies too?"

Newton reluctantly accepted defeat. "I guess I was wrong about the horse, Son," he said awkwardly. "I could have sworn—but never mind. Just proves a man is never too old to make a mistake. Why don't you pick something else for your pet? Tell you—whatever you choose, I'll give you a matched pair."

Junior cheered up somewhat. He was quick to recognise a net gain. "How about a bird?"

Newton smiled in heartfelt relief. "That would be fine, Son, just fine. What kind did you have in mind?"

"Well," Junior said thoughtfully. "I think I'd like a big bird. A real big bird, like a roc, or maybe a harpy—"

Newton reached for *Possible to Rue*.

**THE END**