

Weird Tales

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The Ode to Pegasus

A Dream-Tale

By MARIA MORAVSKY

ERIC could not sleep. There were mosquitoes in his room, and they sang in low monotonous voices the praise of sleeplessness. The pallid moon shone straight into his eyes, and in its waning light the boy saw the weathervane on the garage roof spinning round and round in the changing wind.

The weathervane represented a horse with wings, because, before the advent of automobiles, the garage used to be a stable. A famous family of horse-lovers kept their race-horses there. It had been long ago, Eric was told, maybe fifty years, maybe more . . . Eric was still of the age when fifty years and eternity are of

practically the same length. The old weathervane silvered by the moon looked ancient to him, as ancient as the horse Pegasus of which he had recently learned in school. A wonderful horse!

The wind grew stronger, its direction still undefined. Eric felt sleepy now, his head dizzier and dizzier as the silver horse spun faster. Soon the buzzing of the mosquitoes grew faint, but another disturbing sound startled him: it was the whinnying of a horse.

Nobody kept horses on that modern street, in the up-to-date suburb where Eric's foster-parents owned their ultra-modern house. Even the

milkman would come shattering the early hours of the morning with the rattling automobile truck. Eric looked curiously down the deserted street, milky-white in the misty dawn. It seemed empty. Then some irresistible feeling of ill-directed curiosity made him look upward.

The moon was so pale now that it resembled a thin piece of melting ice. The gray roof of the distant ex-stable could not be discerned in the milky mists. Only the weathervane shone brightly, the top of its metallic wings reflecting the unseen sunrise.

The rounds it made now seemed wider and wider. It was as if the horse detached itself from its tether of steel wire. It was growing larger and larger, it flew more and more slowly around the roof's peak. Eric rubbed his eyes and jumped from the bed. Strange things began to happen.

The great horse flew lower. It reached Eric's window. It alighted on the broad roof of the veranda above which the small dormer window peeped at the world. Then, before Eric could formulate the sudden and beautiful desire, he saw it fulfilled. He was on the silvery back of the great horse, between the powerful wings beating the air with harmonious low swish.

Rosy clouds formed an oval track over which the great horse galloped. The unspeakable rapture which was Eric's began to fade as rapidly as it came; he heard his foster-mother's voice calling: "Eric, it's 7 o'clock! Are you up?"

She did not know how high up he was, thought Eric. He would not answer, for fear of disturbing her. She might worry about this new sport he had discovered. She was always extremely solicitous, caring for his safety till it hurt. No, he would not call back from his brilliant place in the clouds; but she might hear the swish of the great wings and look up, and then all the fun would

end. He must prevent that. Gently he slapped the horse's shining side and whispered into its trembling ear: "Higher! Take me higher!"

The horse whinnied so that the buildings below trembled with awe. Its wings shot upward with uncanny speed. Never in his life had Eric ridden so fast, not even on that memorable day when his foster-father took him to the stadium and let him fly in an airplane.

"Eric!"

He heard his mother's voice growing weaker yet more penetrating than before. There was anxiety in it, and Eric could not bear that. Through his great exhilaration it sounded, persistent, appealing . . . He looked with a sigh toward the distant stars he had hoped to reach, then put his mouth against Pegasus' ear once more: "I must go down, to earth."

He closed his eyes, not to see the hateful descent. Heights often made him dizzy, and he was afraid to fall during the rapid downward flight. He opened his eyes only when his feet touched the window-sill of his room.

"THE boy is very nervous; too much day-dreaming. The other day when his teacher asked him what he would like to be when he grows up, he answered: 'A flyer in the sky.'"

Mr. Torrence smiled tolerantly at the anxiety sounding in his wife's voice.

"Well, it isn't such an impractical dream, after all. Many level-headed men become pilots nowadays. In fact, one has to be very level-headed to make a success of it. I would not object if Eric——"

"Edwin Torrence! Such a dangerous occupation! You would hardly allow him to choose it if the boy were your own child."

She instantly felt that the reproach was undeserved by her husband, who had been so fond of the boy, and amended her words with an affection-

ate pat on his shoulder. She admitted that she was too anxious about the boy. Feminine nonsense, all that! Yes, she would try to cure herself of it. It would be selfish to stand in the boy's way should he choose to become a pilot. Secretly she hoped he would not.

"As to his nervousness, we must consult a specialist," Mr. Torrence concluded hopefully. "It is natural at his age. The dangerous period between adolescence and youth, you know."

Mr. Torrence thought he knew all about what he called human mechanism.

As the years went by, several nerve specialists went over Eric's consciousness and subconsciousness with a fine-toothed comb. Nothing seemed neglected there, in the inner circle of his soul. He apparently overcame his habit of day-dreaming, and embraced willingly the risky but sane career of a pilot, which Mr. Torrence suggested to him, thinking that was what the boy wanted himself.

Eric no longer rode the great white horse. Instead, he mastered many ugly synthetic horses with dead motionless wings which depended on the noisy motors to lift them up to the sky. Once there, he seemed to regain the illusions of which the nerve specialists had robbed him. The rosy clouds at sunrise were almost as beautiful and exciting as during that first ride in the sky when he saw them from Pegasus' back.

Yet the airplane rides never gave him as much thrill as that first dazzling ride. Outwardly he was a careful, persevering, level-headed driver, always minding weather forecasts, never accepting insane bets. He would not loop the loop or engage in the neck-breaking pastime of the tail-spin. He would test most minutely every new plane entrusted to him, before he ever mounted it. It was because of these qualities that he was

chosen to take a part in the great airplane race, the unseen track of which lay between New York and San Francisco.

His aged foster-mother was dead by now, so her kindly fretting and worry could not stop him from accepting the honor of the racing. His father, even more level-headed than his foster-son, saw no obstacles to it. He was, rather proud of this boy whom he had made over, he thought, from a highly strung dreamer into a practical first-rate pilot. He would be dismayed, perhaps, and his pride would waver if he knew that, just on the day of the race, his level-headed foster-son was occupied with a thing which was anything but practical. In the midst of the last preparations and fixings of his plane, he laid down his grease-proof gloves, took out the thin penknife given to him by his foster-mother when he was a boy, and for the better half of an hour scratched something on the upper part of the left wing of the plane. When he finished his eyes held a distant and dreamy look like that which would steal into them in the days of his earliest childhood.

IT WAS the last hour of the race. The great expanse of the Pacific widened before Eric's eyes, tired from incessant wind from which even his glasses could not wholly protect him. His face was hollow and smeared with perspiration. His head ached dully. It seemed to him that he had flown for days. He was so tired that he did not care any longer about the winning of the race. Although he was far ahead of all his competitors, the thought of it gave him no thrill. All his weary brain craved was unconsciousness. Unconsciousness of sleep or even death.

The numerous shocks of the changeable wind currents, the falling into air pockets, being beaten by the rain and sudden unexpected crop of

hail never predicted by the weather report, and above all these physical trials the supreme trial of ambition urging him on and on at top speed, ambition imposed upon him by his father's pride—all this was breaking his inner endurance. While his body still struggled on, the real Eric was almost unconscious of its efforts. He was so deathly tired, it seemed that nothing more could shock him.

But as his tired eyes glimpsed the greenish blue expanse of the misty ocean, with the large, queerly shaped clouds hung low over it, and the sea-gulls' wings catching the glimpses of the unseen sunshine hidden somewhere behind these low clouds, he experienced a shock similar to that of his first ride . . . Had it been his first ride in an airplane or a car, or—something else? He was so tired he could not recall it. Yet all his being strained like a hound on a leash, toward some great experience which was about to be his. The great clouds above sailed lower, became pregnant with some unseen presence . . . Strange things began to happen.

A great white horse emerged from the farthest cloud. It grew nearer and nearer the rattling plane, drowning the unharmonious voice of the querulous motor with the musical swish of its wings.

"Pegasus!" cried Eric.

"Something is wrong with that motor," warned the first layer of his consciousness.

"Pegasus!" cried the real Eric.

The great horse was now near, within the reach of his hand. But his hands clung to the despised synthetic thing which he was driving. His eyes were looking upward, while his ears tried to detect the ominous missings in the beats of the motor. He was like a house divided against itself, when he felt strange waves of powerful thought coming toward him.

The luminous eyes of the great horse were now quite near. It was from them that the thoughts radiated. These orbs of concentrated moonlight flashed into his awed soul the message: "You have forgotten me! You have forgotten Pegasus, for this thing of metal and gas."

"I never forgot you!" shouted Eric. "Look on the outside of the left wing! I have written an ode in your honor. It is scratched on the aluminum so clearly a sea-gull could read it."

"Then leave this machine and mount me," came the luring command.

His mortally tired hands ceased to cling to the guide-stick. Overwhelming dizziness came over him. He lurched forward, then leapt. Next moment he was on the back of the great horse heading into eternity.

THE mangled thing they found among the steaming wreck of the winning airplane was not Eric. It was only his body worn to death by the tiresome realities of life.

