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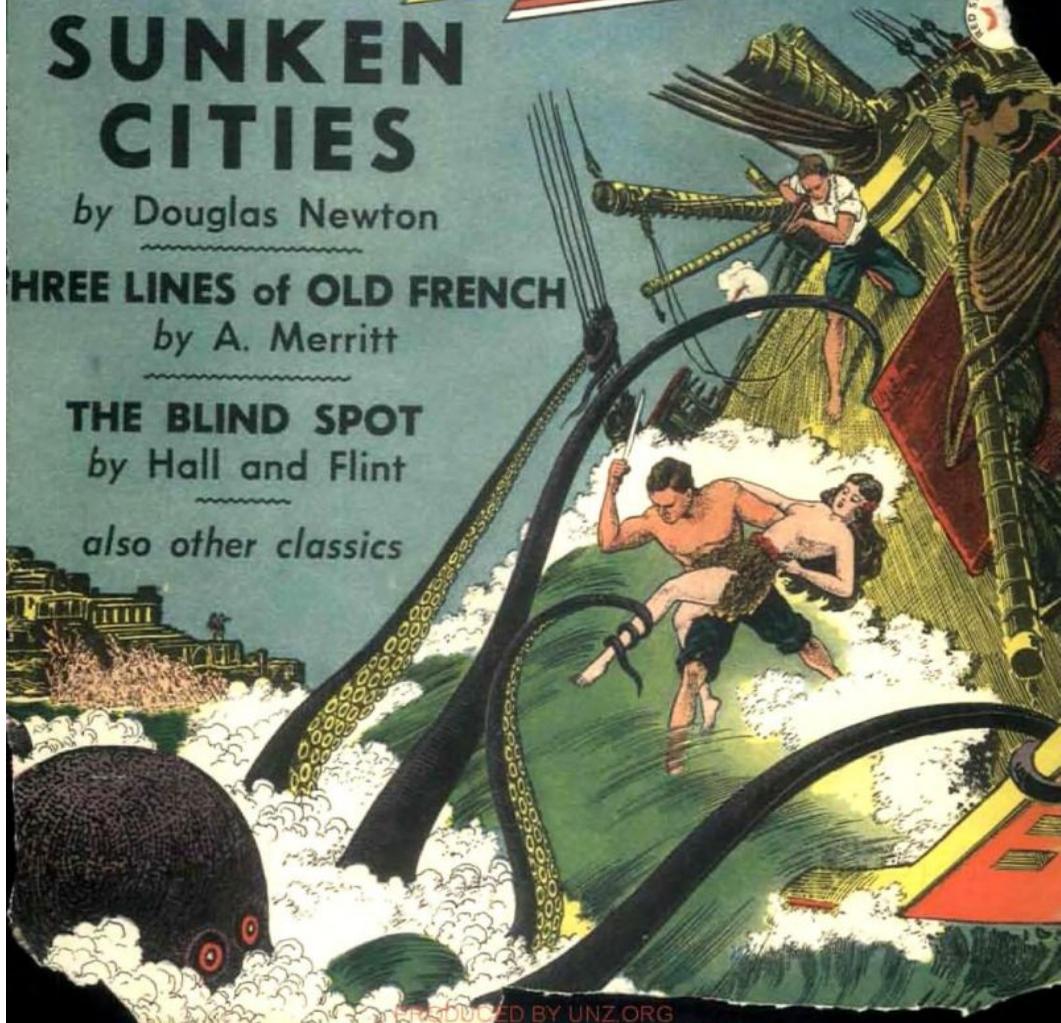
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Title: Pegasus

Date of first publication: 1940

Author: Henry Kuttner (1914-1958)

Date first posted: Mar. 31, 2021

Date last updated: Jan. 3, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20210380

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Pegasus

By
HENRY KUTTNER

First published *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, May/June 1940.

Jim Harry knew how to tame a horse, but he didn't know being able to ride the winged steed was a perilous sort of joy

I want to tell you about Jim Harry Worth and the nag with wings. Now a lot of people think myths are just lying stories, sort of fairy tales that have grown big in the telling by old folks to young ones. And every country has its legends; in China I've heard about dragon ladies— But that's beside the point and I was going to tell you about Jim Harry and the magic horse he got for himself.

He was a tall, lanky, thin-faced youngster, brown as a nut, adolescently awkward when he stood still, but graceful as a colt when he moved. The Worths had a farm in Imperial, and Jim Harry was raised there, taught to do the chores and sent to school when he was old enough. He loved horse-flesh. The boy could ride, and he did, a lot.

It's open country here, and it's big. A kid can lie on his back out in the yellow slopes and look up at a sky that's bigger than all the world. He can lie there and watch the clouds drift till he feels that the earth is moving under him, till he feels the rush of a planet through the universe, and he has time to think. Jim Harry did, I know. The boy had a dream in his brown eyes, and his feet were touched with wanderlust. At first he didn't know what it was. He used to ride helter-skelter all over the place, and hike when he couldn't ride. Then at school he learned to read, and the Valley became a prison that was worse because it had no boundaries.

A dream in the eyes and restless feet—ah, but they are hell for a man, and heaven, too. That I know. You go wandering, and worse, for you go seeking as well, and what you seek you don't know and can never find.

You're trying to answer a question; you don't know what the question is; and in the end it's not answered. When you're tired at last you're ready to sit in the sun and think, but not when you're young. So young Jim Harry thought a lot, and read a great deal, and in a bad day he asked a question about Breadloaf Mountain that towered up to the south, barren and waterless and old.

"Nobody goes up there," said Andy Worth, Jim Harry's dad.

"But hasn't anybody ever gone?"

Andy didn't think so, but he had to go to town to buy some new saddles, so there wasn't much more conversation. Jim Harry's mother, Sarah, didn't know any more, and she told the boy not to bother about it. So Jim Harry went out with his older brother Tom, who was setting traps, and only got laughed at for his pains.

But he got the truth of it from Tante Rush. Some said she was a *paisano* and others said she was once a great woman and had been in Europe. Now she lived in a ramshackle frame building by a spring and kept pigs and chickens, a hag with a withered walnut of a face and eyes bright as garnets. People said she ate loco weed, and maybe she did. Anyway, she was a lonely old woman and because she liked company, she'd learned to listen and agree. The kids

would come and talk to her by the hour, and she'd try to bribe them with her poor food to stay longer. Jim Harry went to see Tante Rush often, because she let him talk and didn't laugh at him, except in a kindly way.



Like a great rocket the horse fled up, and his wings beat the air with a noise like thunder

Tante Rush said there might be anything on top of Breadloaf Mountain.

“Nobody’s ever been there, I guess,” the crone said. “Pooty hard to climb, ain’t it, Jim Harry? You never been and climbed it?”

“Probably nothing up there. Except it’s the highest spot for miles. You can see way over the Valley.” The boy thrust away a hen that came pecking at his worn shoe. “Maybe you can see out to the Pacific.”

“They’re mountains in the way, youngster. Ain’t you never see the ocean?”

“I went to Frisco once with Pop. I got whacked, too. Ran away and went over to Sausalito—climbed up Tamalpais.”

“You like to climb, heh?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I like high places. Say, you ever heard of Pegasus?” He pronounced the word wrongly, staring up at Breadloaf.

“Nope. What is it?”

“Just a story. About a horse with wings. It was supposed to live on a mountain, or come down there once in a while, anyway.”

“I heard of unicorns,” Tante Rush said doubtfully, wriggling a loose incisor back and forth. “Horses might grow horns, but hardly wings, I guess. What good would they do?”

“I dunno.” Jim Harry rolled over on his back and lay in the weeds, watching the clouds move toward Breadloaf. He was silent for a time; then, half asleep, he mused, “Wonder if maybe Pegasus is up on Breadloaf.”

“Shouldn’t wonder,” Tante Rush mumbled agreeably. “Ain’t nobody to say no.”

“I think—maybe—” Jim Harry sat up. “I got nothing to do today except fix the barn, and that’ll wait a bit. I guess I’ll go climb Breadloaf.”

“It’s too hot,” the old woman objected, sighing. “I’ll fix some corn bread if you wait a bit.”

“Nope.” He stood up, started off, and then came back. “Got any sugar?”

Tante Rush found a few bits, which Jim Harry dropped in the pocket of his overalls. Then he went up the trail. When he was hidden from sight, the crone suddenly laughed the high, whinnying laughter of age. “Kids,” she said. “Kids!” A bit of sugar remained in her hand, and she popped it into her mouth, munching slowly. “A horse with wings! Kids!”

But Jim Harry went up Breadloaf, and after a while he met a funny, gnarled, humpbacked dwarf of a man hobbling along on a crooked stick. The manling looked at Jim Harry steadily and said, “I hear that you’re going after the winged horse, boy.”

Jim Harry got a queer uneasy feeling, and wanted to run away. But the dwarf reached out his crooked staff and barred the path.

“Don’t be afraid of me, youngster,” he said. “Why you’re almost twice as big as I am. And you haven’t got your full growth yet.”

Jim Harry tried to broaden his chest, though he knew he was skinny for his age. “I don’t know you,” he said.

“I’ve seen you in town, though. So you’re after Pegasus.”

“Is that the way to say it?” Jim Harry blushed, for he thought the dwarf was making fun of him. “Nope. I’m just hiking.”

The other's deep-set eyes were a little sad. "You're learning fast, boy. Already you fear laughter. Ah, go on up Breadloaf; you'll find Pegasus. But how the devil do you expect to ride him? He won't take a saddle, but you'll need a bridle."

Jim Harry looked sullen and traced designs in the dust with his toe-cap.

"Well, you go on up, and I shouldn't be surprised if you found a bridle on a rock somewhere. But don't forget that Pegasus belongs to the sky. He'll be your feet and take you away and away; he'll be your eyes and see wonderful things. But don't let him stay on the ground long."

The last words sighed out like the rustle of the wind. When Jim Harry looked up the little man was gone, though the tap-tap of the staff drifted up from below.

The boy was tempted to go down and retrace his steps, for he was sensitive to mockery. But then he looked up and saw the top of Breadloaf, and he couldn't help himself after that. And it was a funny thing, but about half a mile further Jim Harry saw a grand bridle lying on a rock just beside the trail. He was a little frightened at first. Then he went on up, carrying the bridle and wondering about the dwarf.

It was hard to reach the summit. Jim Harry was bleeding in several places, and his overalls were sadly torn, when at last he scrambled over the lip of the rock and rolled down a grassy slope. He got up and looked around. The summit wasn't very large; it was saucer-shaped, covered with fine pasturage, and there was a little pool of rain-water in the depressed center. There were a few bushes, but no sign of any horse, winged or otherwise.

So Jim Harry went up to the rim and looked way out at all the world spread underneath him. The Imperial Valley lay little and unreal to the blue western mountains. In back of him the white-capped Sierras towered. And the winds that blew upon him had never been breathed by earthly being.

Jim Harry's feet started to itch, and he wanted to walk right out into the air and away off to the west beyond those shadowy dim ranges, and he wanted to go in the other direction over the Sierras. And north were the snow-lands, and south was Mexico and Panama, and it was a wonder Jim Harry didn't just fall over the edge in his excitement and kill himself. But something made him look up, and there was a speck in the sky, getting larger.

Maybe it was the dream in the boy's eyes that made him recognize Pegasus. Anyway, he ran down to the pool and dropped a few bits of sugar there, and then made a trail of it to the nearest bush. He hid himself in that bush and waited. And Pegasus came.

Ah, but that horse was God's own wonder! A stallion, with high-arched neck, and fine withers, and a white coat that glistened like the stars themselves, and a mane that flew like the borealis, and eyes that could be red as mad flame, and soft and melting as a baby's. Lord, but a man could die after having seen Pegasus, and reckon himself very lucky. And the wings on the stallion! White as an egret's feathers, the powerful pinions spread from the shoulders and glistened in the sun.

Wheeling he came. White against the blue he circled and dropped, and started up in affright, and landed gently as any sparrow beside the pool, and the great wings were furled, and the hoofs of Pegasus spurned the earth. He drank, daintily, and cropped the grass, and fell to playing, kicking up his heels like a colt, and laughing as horses do, and turning back his lovely head to nip at the feathered wings, and all the while Jim Harry watched in a dream.

Pegasus fell to cropping again, and discovered the sugar. Perhaps he mistook it for ambrosia. At any rate, he savored the sweet and followed the trail up to the bush where Jim

Harry crouched hidden. There he started back, but too late. The boy clapped on the bridle, and as Pegasus spread his wings for flight Jim Harry leaped on his back and was off!

And like a rocket the great stallion fled up, his muscles shuddering against the boy's thighs. The wings beat the air with a noise of thunder. Pegasus threw back his head and screamed; he trumpeted his amazement and wrath; and the mane struck Jim Harry's face and made his nose bleed. But the reins were coiled tight around brown fists. The strong thighs were tensed. And only Gabriel with his flaming sword could have knocked Jim Harry from his seat then.

The winds were a gale. Pegasus somersaulted in the air. Jim Harry threw his arms around the neck and clung. Somehow he stuck on. Looking down he could see Breadloaf incredibly far below; he could see beyond the Sierras and out to the Pacific.

Now a funny thing happened. Pegasus, being a horse, loved sugar, and being something more than a horse, he was more than ordinarily smart. So what did he do but reach his head around, sailing along at an even keel with the wings spread horizontally, and nudge Jim Harry's pocket where he smelled the sugar.

At first the boy didn't understand. Then he took out the sweet and fed his mount. He stroked the velvet muzzle, felt the lip of the horse against his palm, and loved the steed. And when the sugar was gone, Pegasus seemed tame enough. He let Jim Harry guide him as though he'd been broken to harness all his life. And I have no words nor heart to tell of that flight through the blue, and of what Jim Harry thought and felt I should not like to say.

But at last the sun was westering and Jim Harry decided to go home. He was late anyway, and he wanted to show Pegasus to his father and mother and his brother. So down they went past Breadloaf till the farm lay spread beneath them.

But nobody was home. The family had gone to town because it was Saturday night, and the hired man was with them. Jim Harry didn't quite know what to do with Pegasus, and he wouldn't put him in the stable; Pegasus couldn't have stood the smell. Finally he put the winged horse in the pasture, tying him with a long rope. Then he went into the house.

That night he took a short ride on Pegasus, getting home about ten o'clock and going to bed right away, for he was tired and fagged. He didn't hear the family come in, and they didn't notice Pegasus in the darkness.

So, anyway, Jim Harry woke up in the dawn to find his father shaking him, looking pretty white and sick. Old Andy Worth knew horse-flesh, and he knew Pegasus couldn't exist. Yet a stallion with wings was in the north pasture, and every time Andy tried to get close the beast would sail up like a bird.

"He's mine," Jim Harry said. "I caught him up on Breadloaf yesterday."

"Gosh A'mighty," said Andy. "A freak like that must belong to somebody. Pull on your pants and come on."

So they went down to the pasture, and Pegasus, who had broken his rope in the night, shot up, trailing it like a tail. Jim Harry felt awful. It was like losing his right arm.

"Yell at him," Andy said. "Maybe he'll come to you."

Jim Harry did. Pegasus came down and skitted around nervously, with a wary eye on Andy.

"Grab the reins," said the older man. "That's it. Now—hey, hold on!" For Pegasus lunged away, dragging Jim Harry after him. "Won't let me get near him, hey? Well, he'll learn." Andy

scrutinized the horse closely. “They’re real, all right. I never heard the like. Now just what happened yesterday, Jim Harry, and don’t give me no lies.”

So Jim Harry told his dad all about it. Andy believed what he wanted to. “They’s no brand on the beast. Get him in the stable. I’ll go get some sugar.”

“I don’t want to put him in the stable,” Jim Harry started to say, but only got a box on the ear for his trouble.

Anyhow, they put Pegasus in the stable, and had a hard time quieting him. He kept bruising his wings against the stalls, fluttering around for a while like a caged chicken. Andy made Jim Harry tie him up pretty carefully, with leather and rawhide, and the boy got quite a few swats for objecting. Then they went back to the house to get Sarah, Tom, and Buck, the hired man.

Jim Harry should have been excited at the prospect of showing off Pegasus, but he wasn’t. The horse looked different in the stable. He kept jerking up his head, his nostrils twitching in disgust at the foul odors. The other horses were afraid of him, too.

“I’m going to get Doc West,” Andy said, rubbing his stubbled lean chin. “He can tell if it’s fake or not. Though I don’t see how it can be, rightly.”

Doc West, the vet, said Pegasus was a sport. He’d never heard the like, either, but he’d seen two-headed calves, and there’d been a baby with a goat’s head born to a woman in the next county, once. Doc West leered at Andy and talked in an undertone, casting quick glances at Sarah, who stood self-consciously aside, watching Pegasus. Jim Harry listened, but some of the things he heard made him feel sick. Tom, his brother, stood with open mouth, breathing hard. And the smell of the stable was everywhere. This wasn’t like riding the skies with Pegasus. It was pretty awful.

Nobody seemed to realize that Pegasus belonged to Jim Harry, or that Jim Harry belonged to Pegasus. His ears still smarted from his father’s calloused palm. There was no help from his mother, either; she’d nearly fainted when she learned that Jim Harry had been riding through the air on the winged horse. It wasn’t natural, she said.

“But a thing like that has to belong to somebody,” Andy said.

“If it does, you’ll hear about it. You got a mint of money in that nag,” said Doc West, casting a greedy glance at Pegasus. “You wouldn’t think of selling him, now, would you?”

“Gosh, no. I’m going to—I dunno. Maybe rent him out to a zoo, or something. He’s worth plenty, I bet.”

Jim Harry ran over to Pegasus and stood in front of the stall. “He’s mine. You can’t have him—”

“Don’t use that tone of voice to me,” Andy grunted. “What would you do with him? Break your fool neck, and it’s a wonder you didn’t do it already. Leaving the horse out in the pasture all night with a broke rope. Miracle he didn’t go off for good.

“Can he honest to gosh fly?” Tom wanted to know. Doc West, too, looked an inquiry.

“Sure can. I saw him.” Andy went toward the stall, but changed his mind when Pegasus flung back and reared, snorting. “Doc, I want you should send some telegrams for me when you get back to town.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to sell him—”

But Andy wouldn’t sell, and wires were sent to various people. There weren’t many answers. Nobody believed in a winged horse. It looked like just another fake—another Barnum mermaid. One man came from Los Angeles to check up, but even he wouldn’t buy or rent Pegasus for his circus.

“Yeah, I know it’s real,” he said, looking puzzled. “But, ye gods, who’d believe it? Everybody’d yell fake. If we advertised a winged horse and showed ’em a colt with bumps on his shoulders, they’d be satisfied. But this—it’s too real. People’d never believe it. They’d think we glued the wings on. It’s too good to be true.”

“You could let him fly around,” Andy suggested. “That’d show he was real.”

“Will he fly with a rope on him?”

Andy had already made Jim Harry try this, without success. “Nope. But he can be ridden—he’s broken pretty well.”

“Catch me riding him! Not even a trapeze artist would do it. It’d be suicide, man. I’ll talk to the boss about it, but it isn’t much use. Not unless we clipped all the feathers off the wings. People might swallow it then.”

Jim Harry was listening through a knothole, and he started to shake. When the man was gone he accosted his father.

“You wouldn’t do that, would you? Pluck Pegasus’ feathers off—”

“Nah,” Andy said absent-mindedly. “Listen, Jim Harry, I want you should see how that horse can run. Not fly—just run. You let him get off the ground and I’ll skin you.”

Jim Harry was only too glad to seize the opportunity of getting on Pegasus’ back again. The horse was fast. He went around the north pasture like greased lightning, his wings folded back and his hoofs spurning the ground. Andy, watching from the rail fence, took off his straw hat and fanned himself. “Okay,” he called at last. “Rub him down and stable him.”

The next day Andy sent more telegrams, and got a man out to time Pegasus with a stopwatch. The two conferred for some time after that.

Jim Harry caught snatches of the conversation. “More money in it, anyway . . . circuses are dead now . . . faster than Man o’ War ever was . . . but you can’t . . .”

The two looked stealthily at Jim Harry and moved further away.

All this worried the boy. He went to the stable, where Tom was trying to get near Pegasus, with no success at all.

“He’s ornery,” Tom said. “Needs breaking. I could do it, too.”

Jim Harry thought of spurs and whips, and went white. He squabbled a bit with Tom, till the older boy left. Then Jim Harry fed Pegasus sugar and rubbed him down carefully, afterwards mixing him a bran mash and getting fresh rain-water.

The winged horse was drooping. His eye had lost its fire, and the proud neck was no longer arched. Pegasus nudged his nose under Jim Harry’s arm and pushed at him, as though inviting the boy to take a ride.

“Gee, I’d like to. But I can’t. Pop’d skin me. I wish I’d never brought you back here, Pegasus. I’d let you go now, if—” But that was no good. Andy would make Jim Harry call the winged horse back, and Pegasus would probably obey his adopted master. Jim Harry remembered Breadloaf and the flight down the winds, and then he sat down in the stall and bawled like a baby. But that did no good, either.

Some weeks passed, and Andy began to look more and more sullen and angry. Tom kept begging him for permission to break Pegasus, till he was sent sprawling under the blow of a hard palm. Sarah didn’t say much, but she made every excuse to keep Jim Harry away from the horse. She knew Pegasus wasn’t good for him. The horse was a freak, and dangerous, and it put ideas into the boy’s head. He was queer enough already.

So one day Andy sent Jim Harry to town with Buck, and for some reason they took a back road that wound through the mountains. The old Ford wheezed and chugged, its worn tires screeching on sharp curves. Buck, a big-shouldered, bad-tempered lout, talked little.

“We got plenty of saddles,” Jim Harry said, squirming about on the broken springs. “Why get another now? And why do I have to go along?”

“You do what your old man says,” Buck grunted, trying to push the brake through the floorboards. To the right the cliff dropped into a sheer abyss. On the left a steep slope mounted. The motor started to boil, and just then they rounded a bend and came in sight of a gnarled dwarf standing beside the road, gripping a twisted stick in his big hands.

Jim Harry recognized the little man. He told Buck to stop, but the hired man just cursed hitch-hikers and went right past. He didn’t go far, though, because the engine went dead and the brakes locked. The dwarf called to Jim Harry.

“It’s a bad thing they’re doing to Pegasus, boy,” he said. “They sent you to town to get you out of the way.”

Jim Harry’s heart went down in his boots. “What are they doing?” he asked.

“Your father’s going to make Pegasus into a race-horse. He’s fast, you know, and there’s more money in that than in circuses. But nobody would let a winged horse run, so Doc West is with your father, and they’re going to operate and take off Pegasus’ wings. That’s why they sent you to town. It’ll kill Pegasus, boy—”

“Shut your trap!” Buck roared, and cursed the dwarf obscenely. He jumped out of the car and ran toward the other, his fist lifted. Jim Harry had seen Buck knock men out with that dangerous hand, and he cried out and tried to scramble out of the Ford. But his overalls had caught on the broken springs.

Jim Harry’s help wasn’t needed, though. The dwarf just lifted his crooked stick and hit Buck with it. It didn’t look like a hard blow; yet Buck collapsed in a heap, knocked cold as an iceberg.

“He isn’t dead,” the dwarf said. “Just stunned. But you’d better be getting back home, boy. The car will work now, I guess. I told you not to let Pegasus stay on the ground long. He belongs to the sky.”

Jim Harry had slid over under the wheel and was trying to start the motor. It caught easily enough. The brakes weren’t locked any more, either. Jim Harry turned the car around with some difficulty on the narrow road, and went kiting back home hell-for-leather.

It was a wonder he didn’t kill himself. The funny part was that he got through the mountains all right, and nothing happened till he was home. A crude plank bridge lay across the irrigation ditch that bounded the road; at the best of times it was pretty shaky. Jim Harry swerved too quickly, and the left front tire hit something and blew out. The Ford turned and went right over the edge of the bridge. It wasn’t much of a drop, and there was only a trickle of water in the ditch, but somehow the car seemed to turn over and fold up like an accordion. Jim Harry was knocked out for a minute or so. Agony brought him back to life.

He was lying in the wreck, and his right foot was one throbbing bundle of pain. It seemed to be pinned under the car, and, in fact, it had been mashed between metal and a rock that lay buried in the mud. If the car hadn’t settled and slid away a bit Jim Harry might have stayed there till help came. And apparently nobody had heard the crash, because a horse was screaming in the stable.

Jim Harry smelled something burning. His foot was free now, and he tried to get up. But he couldn't, so he squirmed along in the mud and somehow scrambled up the sloping side of the ditch. Then he looked at his foot, trailing along behind him.

Well, it wasn't a foot any more. No surgeon could help it. Jim Harry might eventually learn to use a crutch pretty well, though. But you'll remember the wanderlust that was in his feet, and it's no great wonder that Jim Harry felt like going back into the ditch and smashing his skull open against a bit of jagged metal that was sticking up there.

Instead, he screamed.

The outcry from the barn ceased suddenly. Then there was a trumpeting, furious noise. Have you ever heard a horse shriek? It's like nothing else on God's earth. Pegasus shrieked, and the men within the barn began to yell, too. There was the sound of wood being smashed, and the trample of swift hoofs. The stable's door burst open; for a second the rearing figure of the winged horse was outlined, white and rampant, hoofs flying, nostrils red and inflamed.

A man was yelling in agony; another was cursing luridly.

Pegasus, trailing broken thongs and a snapped chain, thundered down the meadow. His wings spread, and he cried out in pain. Blood dappled one mighty pinion.

He rose, circled, and swept down toward Jim Harry. Lightly as a feather he alighted beside the prostrate boy. His neck arched; he nudged Jim Harry's face with his velvety muzzle. The youngster reached up to put his arms around the strong neck.

Men came running. "Hold him! . . . What's happened? . . . Hold on to him!"

Jim Harry looked into the eyes of Pegasus, and man and horse understood each other. The boy rose, lifting himself by gripping the long mane; he gritted his teeth to keep from crying in agony. And Pegasus knelt, so that Jim Harry could mount upon the broad back. There was no rein, but it was not needed.

The running men were very close when Pegasus spurned the earth. Up he went, favoring one wing a little, but seeming to find new strength as he mounted. Jim Harry held on to the mane. He looked down and saw the farm getting smaller and smaller. And he saw Breadloaf to the east, and the Sierras to the east beyond it.

"Higher," he whispered. "Higher, Pegasus."

He could see beyond the Sierras. He could see the Pacific. The sharp wind cooled his burning, crushed foot. On each side the great wings rose and fell steadily, rhythmically.

"Higher—"

Pegasus threw back his head and answered. Up they went, riding the winds, and now the farm was invisible and Breadloaf was dwindling, and the Valley no longer seemed immense.

Then, queerly enough, the gnarled old dwarf was talking, though Jim Harry couldn't see him anywhere.

"Remember what I told you, boy. Pegasus will be your feet and take you away and away; he'll be your eyes and see wonderful things. But don't let him stay long on the ground."

"I won't," Jim Harry promised.

"Never come down again, Pegasus. Go on up—"

The wind was bitterly cold. The sky was darkening to purple. Faintly a few stars appeared. The earth revolved, with a slow and majestic motion, incredibly far beneath the hoofs of Pegasus.

The fingers of Jim Harry tightened on the horse's mane. Then, slowly, gradually, they began to loosen their grip.

[The end of *Pegasus* by Henry Kuttner]