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by Murray Leinster



The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Piebald Hippogriff, by Karen Anderson

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE PIEBALD HIPPOGRIFF

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The Piebald Hippogriff

By **KAREN ANDERSON**

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Because this is a masculine world, the author of this fairytale is usually identified as the wife of Poul Anderson. But a few more incisive cameos of fantasy such as this, and Mr. Anderson may come to be identified as Karen's husband.

The edge of the world is fenced off stoutly enough, but the fence isn't made that will stop a boy. Johnny tossed his pack and coil of rope over it and started climbing. The top three strands were barbed wire. He caught his shirt as he went over, and had to stop for a moment to ease himself off. Then he dropped lightly to the grass on the other side.

The pack had landed in a clump of white clover. A cloud of disturbed bees hung above, and he snatched it away quickly lest they should notice the honeycomb inside.

For a minute he stood still, looking out over the edge. This was different from looking through the fence, and when he moved it was slowly. He eased himself to the ground where a corner of rock rose

clear of the thick larkspur and lay on his belly, the stone hard and cool under his chin, and looked down.

The granite cliff curved away out of sight, and he couldn't see if it had a foot. He saw only endless blue, beyond, below, and on both sides. Clouds passed slowly.

Directly beneath him there was a ledge covered with long grass where clusters of stars bloomed on tall, slender stalks.

He uncoiled his rope and found a stout beech tree not too close to the edge. Doubling the rope around the bole, he tied one end around his waist, slung the pack on his back, and belayed himself down the cliff. Pebbles clattered, saxifrage brushed his arms and tickled his ears; once he groped for a hold with his face in a patch of rustling ferns.

The climb was hard, but not too much. Less than half an hour later he was stretched out on the grass with stars nodding about him. They had a sharp, gingery smell. He lay in the cool shadow of the world's edge for a while, eating apples and honeycomb from his pack. When he was finished he licked the honey off his fingers and threw the apple cores over, watching them fall into the blue.

Little islands floated along, rocking gently in air eddies. Sunlight flashed on glossy leaves of bushes growing there. When an island drifted into the shadow of the cliff, the blossoming stars shone out. Beyond the shadows, deep in the light-filled gulf, he saw the hippogriffs at play.



There were dozens of them, frisking and cavorting in the air. He gazed at them full of wonder. They pretended to fight, stooped at one another, soared off in long spirals to stoop and soar and stoop again.

One flashed by him, a golden palomino that shone like polished wood. The wind whistled in its wings.

Away to the left, the cliff fell back in a wide crescent, and nearly opposite him a river tumbled over the edge. A pool on a ledge beneath caught most of the water, and there were hippogriffs drinking. One side of the broad pool was notched. The overflow fell sheer in a white plume blown sideways by the wind.

As the sun grew hotter, the hippogriffs began to settle and browse on the islands that floated past. Not far below, he noticed, a dozen or so stood drowsily on an island that was floating through the cliff's shadow toward his ledge. It would pass directly below him.

With a sudden resolution, Johnny jerked his rope down from the tree above and tied the end to a projecting knob on the cliff. Slinging on his pack again, he slid over the edge and down the rope.

The island was already passing. The end of the rope trailed through the grass. He slithered down and cut a piece off his line.

It was barely long enough after he had tied a noose in the end. He looked around at the hippogriffs. They had shied away when he dropped onto the island, but now they stood still, watching him warily.

Johnny started to take an apple out of his pack, then changed his mind and took a piece of honeycomb. He broke off one corner and tossed it toward them. They fluttered their wings and backed off a few steps, then stood still again.

Johnny sat down to wait. They were mostly chestnuts and blacks, and some had white stockings. One was piebald. That was the one which, after a while, began edging closer to where the honeycomb had fallen. Johnny sat very still.



The piebald sniffed at the honeycomb, then jerked up its head to watch him suspiciously. He didn't move. After a moment it took the honeycomb.

When he threw another bit, the piebald hippogriff wheeled away, but returned almost at once and ate it. Johnny tossed a third piece only a few yards from where he was sitting.

It was bigger than the others, and the hippogriff had to bite it in two. When the hippogriff bent its head to take the rest Johnny was on his feet instantly, swinging his lariat. He dropped the noose over the hippogriff's head. For a moment the animal was too startled to do anything; then Johnny was on its back, clinging tight.

The piebald hippogriff leaped into the air, and Johnny clamped his legs about convulsed muscles. Pinions whipped against his knees and wind blasted his eyes. The world tilted; they were rushing downward. His knees pressed the sockets of the enormous wings.

The distant ramparts of the world swung madly, and he seemed to fall upward, away from the sun that suddenly glared under the hippogriff's talons. He forced his knees under the roots of the beating wings and dug heels into prickling hair. A sob caught his breath and he clenched his teeth.

The universe righted itself about him for a moment and he pulled breath into his lungs. Then they plunged again. Wind searched under his shirt. Once he looked down. After that he kept his eyes on the flutter of the feather-mane.



A jolt sent him sliding backward. He clutched the rope with slippery fingers. The wings missed a beat and the hippogriff shook its head as

the rope momentarily checked its breath. It tried to fly straight up, lost way, and fell stiff-winged. The long muscles stretched under him as it arched its back, then bunched when it kicked straight out behind. The violence loosened his knees and he trembled with fatigue, but he wound the rope around his wrists and pressed his forehead against whitened knuckles. Another kick, and another. Johnny dragged at the rope.

The tense wings flailed, caught air, and brought the hippogriff upright again. The rope slackened and he heard huge gasps. Sunlight was hot on him again and a drop of sweat crawled down his temple. It tickled. He loosened one hand to dab at the annoyance. A new twist sent him sliding and he grabbed the rope. The tickle continued until he nearly screamed. He no longer dared let go. Another tickle developed beside the first. He scrubbed his face against the coarse fibre of the rope; the relief was like a world conquered.

Then they glided in a steady spiral that carried them upward with scarcely a feather's motion. When the next plunge came Johnny was ready for it and leaned back until the hippogriff arched its neck, trying to free itself from the pressure on its windpipe. Half choked, it glided again, and Johnny gave it breath.

They landed on one of the little islands. The hippogriff drooped its head and wings, trembling.

He took another piece of honeycomb from his pack and tossed it to the ground where the hippogriff could reach it easily. While it ate he stroked it and talked to it. When he dismounted the hippogriff took honeycomb from his hand. He stroked its neck, breathing the sweet warm feathery smell, and laughed aloud when it snuffled the back of his neck.

Tying the rope into a sort of hackamore, he mounted again and rode the hippogriff to the pool below the thunder and cold spray of the

waterfall. He took care that it did not drink too much. When he ate some apples for his lunch, the hippogriff ate the cores.

Afterward he rode to one of the drifting islands and let his mount graze. For a while he kept by its side, making much of it. With his fingers, he combed out the soft flowing plumes of its mane, and examined its hoofs and the sickle-like talons of the forelegs. He saw how the smooth feathers on its forequarters became finer and finer until he could scarcely see where the hair on the hindquarters began. Delicate feathers covered its head.

The island glided further and further away from the cliffs, and he watched the waterfall dwindle away to a streak and disappear. After a while he fell asleep.



He woke with a start, suddenly cold: the setting sun was below his island. The feathery odor was still on his hands. He looked around for the hippogriff and saw it sniffing at his pack.

When it saw him move, it trotted up to him with an expectant air. He threw his arms about the great flat-muscle neck and pressed his face against the warm feathers, with a faint sense of embarrassment at feeling tears in his eyes.

"Good old Patch," he said, and got his pack. He shared the last piece of honeycomb with his hippogriff and watched the sun sink still further. The clouds were turning red.

"Let's go see those clouds," Johnny said. He mounted the piebald hippogriff and they flew off, up through the golden air to the sunset clouds. There they stopped and Johnny dismounted on the highest cloud of all, stood there as it turned slowly gray, and looked into

dimming depths. When he turned to look at the world, he saw only a wide smudge of darkness spread in the distance.

The cloud they were standing on turned silver. Johnny glanced up and saw the moon, a crescent shore far above.

He ate an apple and gave one to his hippogriff. While he chewed he gazed back at the world. When he finished his apple, he was about to toss the core to the hippogriff, but stopped himself and carefully took out the seeds first. With the seeds in his pocket, he mounted again.

He took a deep breath. "Come on, Patch," he said. "Let's homestead the moon."

THE END

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