

ON THE GEM PLANET By Cordwainer Smith

CONSIDER the horse. He climbed up through the crevasses of a cliff of gems; the force which drove him was the love of man.

Consider Mizzer, the resort planet, where the dictator Colonel Wedder reformed the culture so violently that whatever had been slovenly now became atrocious.

Consider Genevieve, so rich that she was the prisoner of her own wealth, so beautiful that she was the victim of her own beauty, so intelligent that she knew there was nothing, nothing to be done about her fate.

Consider Casher O'Neill, a wanderer among the planets, thirsting for justice and yet hoping in his innermost thoughts that 'justice' was not just another word for revenge.

Consider Pontoppidan, that literal gem of a planet, where the people were too rich and busy to have good food, open air or much fun. All they had was diamonds, rubies, tourmalines and emeralds.

Add these together and you have one of the strangest stories ever told from world to world.

When Casher O'Neill came to Pontoppidan, he found that the capital city was appropriately called Andersen.

This was the second century of the Rediscovery of Man. People everywhere had taken up old names, old languages, old customs, as fast as the robots and the underpeople could retrieve the data from the rubbish of "forgotten starlanes or the subsurface ruins of Manhome itself.

Casher knew this very well, to his bitter cost. Re-acculturation had brought him revolution and exile. He came from the

dry, beautiful planet of Mizzer. He was himself the nephew of the ruined ex-ruler, Kuraf, whose collection of objectionable books had at one time been unmatched in the settled galaxy; he had stood aside, half-assenting, when the colonels Gibna and Wedder took over the planet in the name of reform; he had implored the Instrumentality, vainly, for help when Wedder became a tyrant; and now he travelled among the stars, looking for men or weapons who might destroy Wedder and make Kaheer again the luxurious, happy city which it once had been.

He felt that his cause was hopeless when he landed on Pontoppidan. The people were warmhearted, friendly, intelligent, but they had no motives to fight for, no weapons to fight with, no enemies to fight against. They had little public spirit, such as Casher O'Neill had seen back on his native planet of Mizzer. They were concerned about little things.

Indeed, at the time of his arrival, the Pontoppidans were wildly excited about a horse.

A horse! Who worries about one horse? Casher O'Neill himself said so. 'Why bother about a horse? We have lots of them on Mizzer. They are four-handed beings, eighty¹ times the weight of a man, with only one finger on each of the four hands. The fingernail is very heavy and permits them to run fast. That's why our people have them, for running.'

'Why run?' said the Hereditary Dictator of Pontoppidan. 'Why run, when you can fly? Don't you have ornithopters?'

'We don't run with them,' said Casher indignantly. 'We make them run against each other and then we pay prizes to the one which runs fastest.'

'But then,' said Philip Vincent, the Hereditary Dictator, 'you get a very illogical situation. When you have tried out these four-fingered beings, you know how fast each one goes. So what? Why bother?'

His niece interrupted. She was a fragile little thing, smaller than Casher O'Neill liked women to be. She had clear grey eyes, well-marked eyebrows, a very artificial coiffeur of silver-blond hair and the most sensitive little mouth he had ever seen. She conformed to the local fashion by wearing some

kind of powder or face cream which was flesh-pink in colour but which had overtones of lilac. On a woman as old as twenty-two, such a coloration would have made the wearer look like an old hag, but on Genevieve it was pleasant, if rather startling. It gave the effect of a happy child playing grown-up and doing the job joyfully and well. Casher knew that it was hard to tell ages in these off-trail planets. Genevieve might be a grand dame in her third or fourth rejuvenation!

He doubted it, on second glance. What she said was sensible, young, and pert:
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'But uncle, they're animals I'

' I know that,' he rumbled.

'But uncle, don't you see it?'

'Stop saying "but uncle" and tell me what you mean,' growled the Dictator^ very fondly.

'Animals are always uncertain.'

'Of course,' said the uncle.

'That makes it a game, uncle,' said Genevieve. 'They're never sure that any one of them would do the same thing twice. Imagine the excitement - the beautiful big beings from earth running around and around on their four middle fingers, the big fingernails making the gems jump loose from the ground!'

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'I'm not at all sure it's that way. Besides, Mizzer may be covered with something valuable, such as earth or sand, instead of gemstones like the ones we have here on Pontoppidan. You know your flower-pots with their rich, warm, wet, soft earth?'

'Of course I do, uncle. And I know what you paid for them. You were very generous. And still are,' she added diplomatic-wily, glancing quickly at Casher O'Neill to see how the familial piety went across with the visitor.

'We're not that rich on Mizzer. It's mostly sand, with farmland along the Twelve Niles, our big rivers.'

'I've seen pictures of rivers,' said Genevieve. 'Imagine living on a whole world full of flowerpot stuff!'

'You're getting off the subject, darling. We were wondering why anyone would bring one horse, just one horse, to Pontoppidan. I suppose you could race a

horse against

himself, if you had a stop-watch. But would it be fun? Would you do that, young man ?'

Casher O'Neill tried to be respectful. 'In my home we used to have a lot of horses. I've seen my uncle time them one by one.'

'Your uncle?' said the Dictator interestedly. 'Who was your uncle that he had all these four-fingered "horses" running around? They're all Earth animals and very expensive.'

Casher felt the coming of the low, slow blow he had met so many times before, right from the whole outside world into the pit of his stomach. 'My uncle' - he stammered - 'my uncle - I thought you knew - was the old Dictator of Mizzer, Kuraf.'

Philip Vincent jumped to his feet, very lightly for so well-fleshed a man. The young mistress, Genevieve, clutched at the throat of her dress.

'Kuraf!' cried the old Dictator. 'Kuraf! We know about him, even here. But you were supposed to be a Mizzer patriot, not one of Kuraf's people.'

'He doesn't have any children -' Casher began to explain.

'I should think not, not with those habits!' snapped the old man.

'- so I'm his nephew and his heir. But I'm not trying to put the Dictatorship back, even though I should be dictator. I just want to get rid of Colonel Wedder. He has ruined my people, and I am looking for money or weapons or help to make my home-world free.' This was the point, Casher O'Neill knew, at which people either started believing him or did not. If they did not, there was not much he could do about it. If they did, he was sure to get some sympathy. So far, no help. Just sympathy.

But the Instrumentality, while refusing to take action against Colonel Wedder, had given young Casher O'Neill an all-world travel pass - something which a hundred lifetimes of savings could not have purchased for the ordinary man. (His obscene old uncle had gone off to Sunvale, on Triolle, the resort planet, to live out his years between the casino and the beach.) Casher O'Neill held the conscience of Mizzer in his

hand. Only he, among the star travellers, cared enough to fight for the freedom of the Twelve Niles. Here, now, in this room, there was a turning point.

'I won't give you anything,' said the Hereditary Dictator, but he said it in a friendly voice. His niece started tugging at his sleeve.

The older man went on. ' Stop it, girl. I won't give you anything, not if you're part of that rotten lot of Kuraf's, not unless -'

'Anything, sir, anything, just so that I get help or weapons to go home to the Twelve Niles!'

'All right, then. Unless you open your mind to me. I'm a good telepath myself.'

'Open my mind! Whatever for?' The incongruous indecency of it shocked Casher O'Neill. He'd had men and women and governments ask a lot of strange things

from him, but no one before had had the cold impudence to ask him to open his mind. 'And why you?' he went on. 'What would you get out of it? There's nothing much in my mind.'

'To make sure,' said the Hereditary Dictator, 'that you are not too honest and sharp in your beliefs. If you're positive that you know what to do, you might be another Colonel Wedder, putting your people through a dozen torments for a Utopia which never quite comes true. If you don't care at all, you might be like your uncle. He did no real harm. He just stole his planet blind and he had some extraordinary habits which got him talked about between the stars. He never killed a man in his life, did he?'

'No, sir,' said Casher O'Neill, 'he never did.' It relieved him to tell the one little good thing about his uncle; there was so very, very little which could be said in Kuraf's favour.

'I don't like slobbering old libertines like your uncle,' said Philip Vincent, 'but I don't hate them either. They don't hurt other people much. As a matter of actual fact, they don't hurt anyone but themselves. They waste property, though. Like these horses you have on Mizzer, we'd never bring living beings to this world of Pontoppidan, just to play games with. And you know we're not poor. We're no Old North Australia, but we have a good income here.'

That, thought Casher O'Neill, is the understatement of the year, but he was a careful young man with a great deal at stake, so he said nothing.

The Dictator looked at him shrewdly. He appreciated the value of Casher's tactful silence. Genevieve tugged at his sleeve, but he frowned her interruption away.

'If,' said the Hereditary Dictator, 'if,' he repeated, 'you pass two tests, I will give you a green ruby as big as my head. If my Committee will allow me to do so. But I think I can talk them around. One test is that you let me peep all over your mind, to make sure that I am not dealing with one more honest fool. If you're too honest, you're a fool and a danger to mankind. I'll give you a dinner and ship you off-planet as fast as I can. And the other test is - solve the puzzle of this horse. The one horse on Pontoppidan. Why is the animal here? What should we do with it? If it's good to eat, how should we cook it? Or can we trade to some other world, like your planet Mizzer, which seems to set a value on horses?'

'Thank you, sir -' said Casher O'Neill

'But, uncle -' said Genevieve.

'Keep quiet, my darling, and let the young man speak,' said the Dictator.

'- all I was going to ask, is,' said Casher O'Neill, 'what's a green ruby good for? I didn't even know they came green.'

'That, young man, is a Pontoppidan speciality. We have a geology based on ultra-heavy chemistry. This planet was once -a fragment from a giant planet which imploded. The use is simple. With a green ruby you can make a laser beam which will boil away your city of Kaheer in a single sweep. We don't have weapons here and we don't believe in them, so I won't give you a weapon. You'll have to travel farther to find a ship and to get the apparatus for mounting your green ruby. If I give it to you. But you will be one more step along in your fight with Colonel Wedder.'

'Thank you, thank you, most honourable sir!' cried Casher O'Neill.

'But, uncle,' said Genevieve, 'you shouldn't have picked those two things because I know the answers.'

'You know all about him,' said the Hereditary Dictator, 'by some means of your own?'

Genevieve flushed under her lilac-hued foundation cream. 'I know enough for us to know.'

'How do you know it, my darling?'

'I just know,' said Genevieve.

Her uncle made no comment, but he smiled widely and indulgently as if he had heard that particular phrase before.

She stamped her foot. 'And I know about the horse, too. All about it.'

'Have you seen it?'

'No.'

'Have you talked to it?'

'Horses don't talk, uncle.'

'Most underpeople do,' he said.

'This isn't an underperson, uncle. It's a plain unmodified old Earth animal. It never did talk.'

'Then what do you know, my honey?' The uncle was affectionate, but there was the crackle of impatience under his voice.

'I taped it. The whole thing. The story of the horse of Pontoppidan. And I've edited it, too. I was going to show it to you this morning, but your staff sent that young man in.'

Casher O'Neill looked his apologies at Genevieve.

She did not notice him. Her eyes were on her uncle.

'Since you've done this much, we might as well see it.' He turned to the attendants. 'Bring chairs. And drinks. You know mine. The young lady will take tea with lemon. Real tea. Will you have coffee, young man?'

'You have coffee!' cried Casher O'Neill. As soon as he said it, he felt like a fool. Pontoppidan was a rich planet. On most worlds' exchanges, coffee came out to about two man-years per kilo. Here half-tracks crunched their way through gems as they went to load up the frequent trading vessels.

The chairs were put in place. The drinks arrived. The Hereditary Dictator had been momentarily lost in a brown study, as though he were wondering about his promise to Casher O'Neill. He had even murmured to the young man, 'Our bargain stands? Never mind what my niece says.' Casher

had nodded vigorously. The old man had gone back to frowning at the servants and did not relax until a tiger-man bounded into the room, carrying a tray with acrobatic precision. The chairs were already in place.

The uncle held his niece's chair for her as a command that she sit down. He nodded Casher O'Neill into a chair on the other side of himself.

He commanded, 'Dim the lights ...'

The room plunged into semi-darkness.

Without being told, the people took their places immediately behind the three main seats and the underpeople perched or sat on benches and tables behind them. Very little was spoken. Casher O'Neill could sense that Pontoppidan was a well-run place. He began to wonder if the Hereditary Dictator had much real work left to do, if he could fuss that much over a single horse. Perhaps all he did was boss his niece and watch the robots load truckloads of gems into sacks while the underpeople weighed them, listed them and wrote out the bills for the customers.

II

There was no screen; this was a good machine.

The planet Pontoppidan came into view, its airless brightness giving strong hints of the mineral riches which might be found.

Here and there enormous domes, such as the one in which this palace was located, came into view.

Genevieve's own voice, girlish, impulsive and yet didactic, rang out with the story of her planet. It was as though she had prepared the picture not only for her own uncle, but for off-world visitors as well. (By Joan, that's it! thought Casher O'Neill. If they don't raise much food here, outside of hydroponics, and don't have any real People Places, they howl to trade: that does mean visitors, and many, many of them.)!

The story was interesting but the girl herself was more interesting. Her face shone in the shifting light which the images - a metre, perhaps a little more, from the floor-reflected across the room. Casher O'Neill thought that he had

never before seen a woman who so peculiarly combined intelligence and charm. She was girl, girl, girl, all the way through; but she was also very smart and pleased with being smart. It betokened a happy life. He found himself glancing covertly at her. Once he caught her glancing, equally covertly, at him. The darkness of the scene enabled them both to pass it off as an accident without embarrassment.

Her videotape had come to the story of the dipsies, enormous canyons which lay like deep gashes on the surface of the planet. Some of the colour views were spectacular beyond belief. Casher O'Neill, as the 'appointed one' of Mizzer, had had plenty of time to wander through the nonsalacious parts of his uncle's collections, and he had seen pictures of the most notable worlds.

Never had he seen anything like this. One view showed a sunset against a six-kilometre cliff of a material which looked like solid emerald. The peculiar bright sunshine of Pontoppidan's small, penetrating, lilac-hued sun ran like living water over the precipice of gems. Even the reduced image, one metre by one metre, was enough to make him catch his breath.

The bottom of the dippy had vapour emerging in curious cylindrical columns which seemed to erode as they reached two or three times the height of a man. The recorded voice of Genevieve was explaining that the very thin atmosphere

of Pontoppidan would not be breathable for another 2,520 years, since the settlers did not wish to squander their resources on a luxury like breathing when the whole planet only had 60,000 inhabitants; they would rather go on with masks and use their wealth in other ways. After all, it was not as though they did not have their domed cities, some of them many kilometres in radius. Besides the usual hydroponics, they had even imported 7'2 hectares of garden soil, 5'5 centimetres deep, together with enough water to make the gardens rich and fruitful. They had bought worms, too, at the price of eight carats of diamond per living worm, in order to keep the soil of the gardens loose and living.

Genevieve's 'transcribed voice rang out with pride as she listed these accomplishments of her people, but a note of sadness came in when she returned to the subject of the dipsies.

' . . . and though we would like to live in them and develop their atmospheres, we dare not. There is too much escape of radioactivity. The geysers themselves may or may not be contaminated from one hour to the next. So we just look at them. Not one of them has ever been settled, except for the Hippy Dipsy, where the horse came from. Watch this next picture.'

The camera sheered up, up, up from the surface of the planet. Where it had wandered among mountains of diamonds and valleys of tourmalines, it now took to the blue-black of near, inner space. One of the canyons showed (from high altitude) the grotesque pattern of a human woman's hips and legs, though what might have been the upper body was lost in a confusion of broken hills which ended in a bright almost-iridescent plain to the North.

'That,' said the real Genevieve, overriding her own voice on the screen, ' is the Hippy Dipsy. There, see the blue ? That's the only lake on all of Pontoppidan. And here we drop to the hermit's house.'

Casher O'Neill almost felt vertigo as the camera plummeted from off-planet into the depths of that immense canyon. The edges of the canyon almost seemed to move like lips with the plunge, opening and folding inward to swallow him up.

Suddenly they were beside a beautiful little lake.

A small hut stood beside the shore.

In the doorway there sat a man, dead.

His body had been there a long time; it was already mummified.

Genevieve's recorded voice explained the matter: '. . . in Norstrilian law and custom, they told him that his time had come. They told him to go to the Dying House, since he was no longer fit to live. In Old North Australia, they are so rich that they let everyone live as long as he wants, unless the old person can't take rejuvenation any more, even with stroon, and unless he or she gets to be a real pest to the living. If that happens, they are invited to go to the Dying House, where they shriek and pant with delirious joy for weeks or days until

they finally die of an overload of sheer happiness and excitement . . .'

There was a hesitation, even in the recording. 'We never knew why this man refused. He stood off-planet and said that he had seen views of the Hippy Dipsy. He said it was the most beautiful place on all the worlds, and that he wanted to build a cabin there, to live alone, except for his non-human friend. We thought it was some small pet. When we told him that the Hippy Dipsy was very

dangerous, he said that this did not matter in the least to him, since he was old and dying anyhow. When he offered to pay us twelve times our planetary income if we would lease him twelve hectares on the condition of absolute privacy. No pictures, no scanners, no help, no visitors. Just solitude and scenery. His name was Perino. My great-grandfather asked for nothing more, except the written transfer of credit. When he paid it, Perino even asked that he be left alone after he was dead. Not even a vault rocket so that he could either orbit Pontoppidan forever or start a very slow journey to nowhere, the way so many people like it. So this is our picture of him. We took it when the light went off in the People Room and one of the tiger-men told us that he was sure a human consciousness had come to an end in the Hippy Dipsy.

'And we never even thought of the pet. After all, we had never made a picture of him. This is the way he arrived from Perino's shack.'

A robot was shown in a control room, calling excitedly in the old Common Tongue.

'People, people! Judgement needed! Moving object coming out of the Hippy Dipsy. Object has improper shape. Not a correct object. Should not rise. Does so anyhow. People, tell me, people, tell me! Destroy or not destroy? This is an improper object It should fall, not rise. Coming out of the Hippy Dipsy.'

A firm click shut off the robot's chatter. A well-shaped woman took over. From the nature of her work and the lithe, smooth tread with which she walked, Casher O'Neill suspected that she was of cat origin, but there was nothing in her dress or in her manner to show, that she was underpeople.

The woman in the picture lighted a screen.

She moved her hands in the air in front of her, like a blind person feeling his way through open day.

The picture on the inner screen came to resolution.

A face showed in it.

What a face! thought Casher O'Neill, and he heard the other people around him in the viewing room.

The horse!

Imagine a face like that of a newborn cat, thought Casher. Mizzer is full of cats. But imagine the face with a huge mouth, with big yellow teeth - a nose long beyond imagination. Imagine eyes which look friendly. In the picture they were rolling back and forth with exertion, but even there - when they did not feel observed - there was nothing hostile about the set of the eyes. They were tame, companionable eyes. Two ridiculous ears stood high, and a little tuft of golden hair showed on the crest of the head between the ears.

The viewed scene was comical, too. The cat-woman was as astonished as the viewers. It was lucky that she had touched the emergency switch, so that she not only saw the horse, but had recorded herself and her own actions while bringing him into view.

Genevieve whispered across the chest of the Hereditary Dictator: 'Later we found he was a palomino pony. That's a very special kind of horse. And Perino had made him immortal, or almost immortal.'

' Sh-h!' said her uncle.

The screen-within-the-screen showed the cat-woman waving her hands in the air some more. The view broadened.

The horse had four hands and no legs, or four legs and no hands, whichever way you want to count them.

The horse was fighting his way up a narrow cleft of rubies which led out of the Hippy Dipsy. He panted heavily. The oxygen bottles on his sides swung wildly as he clambered. He must have seen something, perhaps the image of the cat-woman, because he said a word:

Whay-yay-yay-yay-whay-yay!

The cat-woman in the nearer picture spoke very distinctly:

'Give your name, age, species and authority for being on this planet.' She spoke clearly and with the utmost possible authority.

The horse obviously heard her. His ears tipped forward. But his reply was the same as before:

Whay-yay-yay!

Casher O'Neill realized that he had followed the mood of the picture and had seen the horse the way that the people on Pontoppidan would have seen him. On second thought, the horse was nothing special, by the standards of the Twelve Niles or the Little Horse Market in the city of Kaheer. It was an old pony stallion, no longer fit for breeding and probably not for riding either. The hair had whitened among the gold; the teeth were worn. The animal showed many injuries and burns. Its only use was to be killed, cut up and fed to the racing dogs. But he said nothing to the people around him. They were still spellbound by the picture.

The cat-woman repeated:

'Your name isn't Whayayay. Identify yourself properly; name first.'

The horse answered her with the same word in a higher key.

Apparently forgetting that she had recorded herself as well, as the emergency screen, the cat-woman said, 'Til call real people if you' don't answer! They'll be annoyed at being bothered.'

The horse rolled his eyes at her and said nothing.

The cat-woman pressed an emergency button on the side of the room. One could not see the other communication screen which lighted up, but her end of the conversation was plain.

' I want an ornithopter. Big one. Emergency.'

A mumble from the side screen.

'To go to the Hippy Dipsy. There's an underperson there, iind he's in so much trouble that he won't talk.' From the screen beside her, the horse seemed to have understood the sense of the message, if not the words, because he repeated:

Whay-yay-whay-yay-yay!

'See,' said the cat-woman to the person in the other screen, 'that's what he's doing. It's obviously an emergency.'

The voice from the other screen came through, tinny and remote by double recording:

'Fool, yourself, cat-woman! Nobody can fly an ornithopter into a dippy. Tell your silly friend to go back to the floor of the dippy and we'll pick him up by spare rocket.'

Whay-yay-yay! said the horse impatiently.

'He's not my friend,' said the cat-woman with brisk annoyance. 'I just discovered him a couple of minutes ago. He's asking for help. Any idiot can see that, even if we don't know his language.'

The picture snapped off.

The next scene showed tiny human figures working with searchlights at the top of an immeasurably high cliff. Here and there, the beam of the searchlight caught the cliff face; the translucent faceted material of the cliff looked almost like rows of eerie windows, their lights snapping on and off, as the searchlight moved.

Far down there was a red glow. Fire came from inside the mountain.

Even with telescopic lenses the cameraman could not get the close-up of the glow. On one side there was the figure of the horse, his four arms stretched at impossible angles as he held himself firm in the crevasse; on the other side of the fire there were the even tinier figures of men, labouring to fit some sort of sling to reach the horse.

For some odd reason having to do with the techniques of recording, the voices came through very plainly, even the heavy, tired breathing of the old horse. Now and then he uttered one of the special horse-words which seemed to be the limit of his vocabulary. He was obviously watching the men, and was firmly persuaded of their friendliness to him. His large, tawny yellow eyes rolled wildly in the light of the searchlight and every time the horse looked down, he seemed to shudder. Jp

Casher O'Neill found this entirely understandable. The bottom of the Hippy Dippy was nowhere in sight; the horse, even with nothing more than the enlarged fingernails of his middle fingers to help him climb, had managed to get about four of the six kilometres' height of the cliff face behind him.

The voice of a tiger-man sounded clearly from among the shift of men, underpeople and robots who were struggling on the face of the cliff.

'It's a gamble, but not much of a gamble. I weigh six hundred kilos myself, and, do you know, I don't think I've ever had to use my full strength since I was a kitten. I know that I can jump across the fire and help that thing be more comfortable. I can even tie a rope around him so that he won't slip and fall after all the work we've done. And the work he's done, too,' added the tiger-man grimly. 'Perhaps I can just take him in my arms and jump back with him. It will be perfectly safe if you have a safety rope around each of us. After all, I never saw a less prehensile creature in my life. You can't call those fingers of his "fingers." They look like little boxes of bone, designed for running around and not much good for anything else.'

There was a murmur of other voices and then the command of the supervisor. 'Go ahead.'

No one was prepared for what happened next.

The cameraman got the tiger-man right in the middle of his frame, showing the attachment of one rope around the tiger-man's broad waist. The tiger-man was a modified type whom the authorities had not bothered to put into human cosmetic form. He still had his ears on top of his head, yellow and black fur over his face, huge incisors overlapping his lower jaw and enormous antenna-like whiskers sticking out from his moustache. He must have been thoroughly modified inside, however, because his temperament was calm, friendly and even a little humorous; he must have had a carefully re-done mouth, because the utterance of human speech came to him clearly and without distortion.

He jumped - a mighty jump, right through the top edges of the flame.

The horse saw him.

The horse jumped too, almost in the same moment, also through the top of the flame, going the other way.

The horse had feared the tiger-man more than he did the cliff.

The horse landed right in the group of workers. He tried

not to hurt them with his flailing limbs, but he did knock one man - a true man, at that - off the cliff. The man's scream faded as he crashed into the impenetrable darkness below.

The robots were quick. Having no emotions except on, off, and high, they did not get excited. They had the horse trussed and, before the true men and underpeople had ensured their footing, they had signalled the crane operator at the top of the cliff. The horse, his four arms swinging limply, disappeared upward.

The tiger-man jumped back through the flames to the nearer ledge. The picture went off.

In the viewing room, the Hereditary Dictator Philip Vincent stood up. He stretched, looking around.

Genevieve looked at Casher O'Neill expectantly.

'That's the story,' said the Dictator mildly. 'Now you solve it.'

'Where is the horse now?' said Casher O'Neill.

'In the hospital, of course. My niece can take you to see him.'

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After a short, painful and very thorough peeping of his own mind by the Hereditary Dictator, Casher O'Neill and Genevieve set off for the hospital in which the horse was being kept in bed. The people of Pontoppidan had not known what else to do with him, so they had placed him, under strong sedation and were trying to feed him with sugar-water compounds going directly into his

veins. Genevieve told Casher that the horse was wasting away.

They walked to the hospital over amethyst pebbles.

Instead of wearing his spacesuit, Casher wore a surface helmet which enriched his oxygen. His hosts had not counted on his getting spells of uncontrollable itching from the sharply reduced atmospheric pressure. He did not dare mention the matter, because he was still hoping to get the green ruby as a weapon in his private war for the liberation of the Twelve Niles from the rule of Colonel Wedder. Whenever the itching became less than excruciating, he enjoyed the walk and the

company of the slight, beautiful girl who accompanied him across the fields of jewels to the hospital. (In later years, he sometimes wondered what might have happened. Was the itching a part of his destiny, which saved him for the freedom of the city of Kaheer and the planet Mizzer? Might not the innocent brilliant loveliness of the girl have otherwise tempted him to forswear his duty and stay forever on Pontoppidan?)

The girl wore a new kind of cosmetic for outdoor walking - a warm peach-hued powder which let the natural pink of her cheeks show through. Her eyes, he saw, were a living, deep grey; her eyelashes, long; her smile, innocently provocative beyond all ordinary belief. It was a wonder that the Hereditary Dictator had not had to stop duels and murders between young men vying for her favour.

They finally reached the hospital, just as Casher O'Neill thought he could stand it no longer and would have to ask Genevieve for some kind of help or carriage to get indoors and away from the frightful itching.

The building was underground.

The entrance was sumptuous. Diamonds and rubies, the size of building-bricks on Mizzer, had been set to frame the doorway, which was apparently enamelled steel. Kuraf at his most lavish had never wasted money on anything like this door-frame. Genevieve saw his glance.

'It did cost a lot of credits. We had to bring a blind artist all the way from Olympia to paint that enamel-work. The poor man. He spent most of his time trying to steal extra gem-stones when he should have known that we pay justly and never allow anyone to get away with stealing.'

'What do you do?' asked Casher O'Neill. .

'We cut thieves up in space, just at the edge of the atmosphere. \We have more manned boats in orbit than any other planet I know of. Maybe Old North Australia has more, but, then, nobody ever gets close enough to Old North Australia to come back alive and tell.'

They went on into the hospital.

A respectful chief surgeon insisted on keeping them in the office and entertaining them with tea and confectionery, when

they both wanted to go and see the horse; common politeness prohibited their pushing through. Finally they, got past the ceremony and into the room in which the horse was kept.

Close up, they could see how much he had suffered. There were cuts and abrasures over almost all of his body. One of his hooves - the doctor told

them that was the correct name, hoof, for the big middle fingernail on which he walked - was split; the doctor had put a cadmium-silver bar through it. The horse lifted his head when they entered, but he saw that they were just more people, not horsey people, so he put his head down, very patiently.

'What's the prospect, doctor?' asked Casher O'Neill, turning away from the animal.

'Could I ask you, sir, a foolish question first?'

Surprised, Casher could only say yes.

'You're an O'Neill. Your uncle is Kuraf. How do you happen to be called "Casher"?''

'That's simple,' laughed Casher. 'This is my young-man-name. On Mizzer, everybody gets a baby name, which nobody uses. Then he gets a nickname. Then he gets a young-man-name, based on some characteristic or some friendly joke, until-he picks out his* career. When he enters his profession, he picks out his own career name. If I liberate Mizzer and overthrow Colonel Wedder, I'll have to think up a suitable career name for myself.'

'But why "Casher," sir?' persisted the doctor.

'When I was a little boy and people asked me what I wanted, I always asked for cash. I guess that contrasted with my uncle's wastefulness, so they called me Casher.'

' But what is cash ? One of your crops ?'

It was Casher's turn to look amazed. ' Cash is money. Paper credits. People pass them back and forth when they buy things.'

' Here • on Pontoppidan, all the money belongs to me. All of it,' said Genevieve. 'My uncle is trustee for me. But I have never been allowed to touch it or to spend it. It's all just planet business.'

The doctor blinked respectfully. ' Now this- horse, sir, if you will pardon my asking about your name, is a very strange

case. Physiologically he is a pure earth type. He is suited only for a vegetable diet, but otherwise he is a very close relative of man. He has a single stomach and a very large cone-shaped heart. That's where the trouble is. The heart is in bad condition. He is dying.'

'Dying?' cried Genevieve.

'That's the sad, horrible part,' said the doctor. 'He is dying but he cannot die. He could go on like this for many years. Perino wasted enough stropn on this animal to make a planet immortal. Now the animal is worn out but cannot die.'

Casher O'Neill let out a long, low, ululating whistle. Everybody in the room jumped. He disregarded them. It was the whistle he had used near the stables, back among the Twelve Niles, when he wanted to call a horse.

The horse knew it. The large head lifted. The eyes rolled at him so imploringly that he expected tears to fall from them, even though he was pretty sure that horses could not lachry-mate.

He squatted on the floor, close to the horse's head, with a hand on its mane.

'Quick,' he murmured to the surgeon. 'Get me a piece of sugar and an underperson-telepath. The underperson-tele-path must not be of carnivorous origin.'

The doctor looked stupid. He snapped 'Sugar' at an assistant but he squatted down next to Casher O'Neill and said, 'You will have to repeat that about an underperson. This is not an underperson hospital at all. We have very few of them here. The horse is here only by command of His Excellency Philip Vincent, who said that the horse of Perino should be given the best of all possible care. He even told me,' said the doctor, 'that if anything wrong happened to this horse, I would ride patrol for it for the next eighty years. So I'll do what I can. Do you find me too talkative? Some people do. What kind of an underperson do you want?'

'I need/ said Casher, very calmly, 'a telepathic underperson, both to find out what this horse wants and to tell the horse that I am here to help-him. Horses are vegetarians and

they do not like meat-eaters. Do you have a vegetarian under-person around the hospital?'

'We used to have some squirrel-men,' said the chief surgeon, 'but when we changed the air circulating system the squirrel-rnen went away with the old equipment. I think they went to a mine. We have tiger-men, cat-men, and my secretary is a wolf.'

'Oh, no!' said Casher O'Neill. 'Can you imagine a sick horse confiding in a wolf ?'

'It's no more than you are doing,' said the surgeon, very softly, glancing up to see if Genevieve were in hearing range, and apparently judging that she was not. 'The Hereditary Dictators here sometimes cut suspicious guests to pieces on their way off the planet. That is, unless the guests are licensed, regular traders. You are not. You might be a spy, planning to rob us. How do I know? I wouldn't give a diamond chip for your chances of being alive next week. What do you want to do about the horse? That might please the Dictator. And you might live.'

Casher O'Neill was so staggered by the confidence of the surgeon that he squatted there thinking about himself, not about the patient. The horse licked him, seemingly sensing that he needed solace.

The surgeon had an idea. 'Horses and dogs used to go together, didn't they, back in the old days of Manhome, when all the people lived on planet Earth ?'

'Of course,' said Casher. 'We still run them together in hunts on Mizzer, but under these new laws of the Instrumentality we've run out of underpeople-criminals to hunt.'

'I have a good dog,' said the chief surgeon. 'She talks pretty well, but she is so sympathetic that she upsets the patients by loving them too much. I have her down in the second under-basement tending the dish-sterilizing machinery.'

' Bring her up,' said Casher in a whisper.

He Remembered that he did not need to whisper about this, so he stood up and spoke to Genevieve:

'They have found a good dog-telepath who may reach through to the mind of the horse. It may give us the answer.'

She put her hand on his forearm gently, with the approbatory gesture of a princess. Her fingers dug into his flesh. Was

she wishing him well against her uncle's habitual treachery, or was this merely the impulse of a kind young girl who knew nothing of the way the world was run ?

IV

The interview went extremely well.

The dog-woman was almost perfectly humaniform. She looked like a tired, cheerful, worn-out old woman, not valuable enough to be given the life-prolonging santal drug called stroon. Work had been her life and she had had plenty of it. Casher O'Neill felt a twinge of envy when he realized that happiness goes by the petty chances of life and not by the large destiny. This dog-woman, with her haggard face and her stringy grey hair, had more love, happiness and sympathy than Kural had found with his pleasures, Colonel Wedder with his powers, or himself with his crusade. Why did life do that? Was there no justice, ever? Why should a worn-out worthless old underwoman be happy when he was not?

'Never mind,' she said, 'you'll get over it and then you will be happy.'

'Over what?' he said. 'I didn't say anything.'

'I'm not going to say it,' she retorted, meaning that she was telepathic. 'You're a prisoner of yourself. Some day you will escape to unimportance and happiness. You're a good man. You're trying to save yourself, but you really like this horse.'

'Of course I do,' said Casher O'Neill. 'He's a brave old horse, climbing out of that hell to get back to people.'

When he said the word hell her eyes widened, but she said nothing. In his mind, he saw the sign of a fish scrawled on a dark wall and he felt her think at him. So you too know something of the 'dark wonderful knowledge' which is not yet to be revealed to all mankind?

He thought a cross back at her and then turned his thinking to the horse, lest their telepathy be monitored and strange punishments await them both.

She spoke in words, ' Shall we link ?'

'Link,' he said. .

Genevieve stepped up. Her clear-cut, pretty, sensitive face was alight with excitement. 'Could I - could I be cut in?'

'Why not?' said the dog-woman, glancing at him. He nodded. The three of them linked hands and then the dog-woman put her left hand on the forehead of the old horse.

The sand splashed beneath their feet as they ran towards Kaheer. The delicious pressure of a man's body was on their backs. The red sky of Mizzer gleamed over them. There came the shout:

'I'm a horse, I'm a horse, I'm a horse!'

'You're from Mizzer,' thought Casher O'Neill, 'from Kaheer itself!'

'I don't know names,' thought the horse, 'but you're from my land. The land, the good land.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Dying,' thought the horse. 'Dying for hundreds and thousands of sundowns. The old one brought me. No riding, no running, no people. Just the old one and the small ground. I have been dying since I came here.'

Casher O'Neill got a glimpse of Perino sitting and watching the horse, unconscious of the cruelty and loneliness which he had inflicted on his large pet by making it immortal and then giving it no work to do.

'Do you know what dying is?'

Thought the horse promptly: 'Certainly. No-horse.'

'Do you know what life is?'

'Yes. Being a horse.'

'I'm not a horse,' thought Casher O'Neill, 'but I am alive.'

'Don't complicate things,' thought the horse at him, though Casher realized it was his own mind and not the horse's which supplied the words.

'Do you want to die?'

'To no-horse? Yes, if this room, forever, is the end of things.'

'What would you like better?' thought Genevieve, and her thoughts were like a cascade of newly-minted silver coins falling into all their minds: brilliant, clean, bright, innocent.

The answer was quick: 'Dirt beneath my hooves, and wet air again, and a man on my back.'

The dog-woman interrupted: 'Dear horse, you know me?'

'You're a dog,' thought the horse. 'Goo-oo-oo-ood dog!'

'Right,' thought the happy old slattern, 'and I can tell these people how to take care of you. Sleep now, and when you waken you will be on the way to happiness.'

She thought the command sleep so powerfully at the old horse that Casher O'Neill and Genevieve both started to fall unconscious and had to be caught by the hospital attendants.

As they re-gathered their wits, she was finishing her commands to the surgeon. '- and put about 40 per cent supplementary oxygen into the air. He'll have to have a real person to ride him, but some of your orbiting sentries would rather ride a horse up there than do nothing. You can't repair the heart. Don't try it. Hypnosis will take care of the sand of Mizzer. Just load his mind with one or two of the drama-cubes packed full of desert adventure. Now, don't you worry about me. I'm not going to claim any credit, and I'm not going

to give you any more suggestions. People-man, you!' she laughed. 'You can forgive us dogs anything, except for being right. It makes you feel inferior for a few minutes. Never mind. I'm going back downstairs to my dishes. I love them, I really do. Good-bye, you pretty thing,' she said to Genevieve. 'And good-bye, wanderer! Good luck to you,' she said to Casher O'Neill. 'You will remain miserable as long as you seek justice, but when you give up, righteousness will come to you and you will be happy. Don't worry. You're young and it won't hurt you to suffer a few more years. Youth is an extremely curable disease, isn't it?'

She gave them a full curtsy, like one Lady of the Instrumentality saying good-bye to another. Her wrinkled old face was lit up with smiles, in which happiness was mixed with a tiniest bit of playful mockery.

'Don't mind me, boss,' she said to the surgeon. 'Dishes, here I come.' She swept out of the room.

'See what I mean?' said the surgeon. 'She's so horribly happy \ How can anyone run, a hospital if a dishwasher gets

all over the place, making people happy ? We'd be out of jobs. Her ideas were good, though.'

They were. They worked. Down to the last letter of the dog-woman's instructions.

There was argument from the council. Casher O'Neill went along to see them in session.

One councillor, Bashnack, was particularly vociferous in objecting to any action concerning the horse. 'Sire,' he cried, 'sire! We don't even know the name of the animal! I must protest this action, when we don't know -'

'That we don't,' assented Philip Vincent. 'But what does a name have to do with it?'

'The horse has no identity, not even the identity of an animal. It is just a pile of meat left over from the estate of Perino. We should kill the horse and eat the meat ourselves. Or, if we do not want to eat the meat, then we should sell it off-planet. There are plenty of peoples around here, who would pay a pretty nice price for genuine earth meat. Pay no attention to me, sire! You are the Hereditary Dictator and I am nothing. I have no power, no property, nothing. I am at your mercy. All I can tell you is to follow your own best interests. I have .only a voice. You cannot reproach me for using my voice when I am trying to help you, sire, can you? That's all I am doing, helping you. If you spend any credits at all on this animal you will be doing wrong, wrong, wrong. We are not a rich planet. We have to pay for expensive defences just in order to stay alive. We cannot even afford to pay for air that our children can go out and play. And you want to spend money on a horse which cannot even talk! I tell you, sire, this council is going to vote against you, just to protect your own interests and the interests of the Honourable Gerievieve as Eventual Title-holder of all Pontoppidan. You are not going to get away with this, sire! We are helpless before your power, but we will insist on advising you -'

'Hear! Hear!' cried several of the councillors, not the least dismayed by the slight frown of the Hereditary Dictator.

' I will take the word,' said Philip Vincent himself.

Several had had their hands raised, asking for the floor. One

obstinate man kept his hand up even when the Dictator announced his intention to speak. Philip Vincent took note of him, too:

'You can talk when I am through, if you want to.' He looked calmly around the room, smiled imperceptibly at his niece, gave Casher O'Neill the briefest of nods, and then announced:

'Gentlemen, it's not the horse which is on trial. It's Pontoppidan. It's we who are trying ourselves. And before whom are we trying ourselves, gentlemen? Each of us is before that most awful of courts, his own conscience.

'If we kill that horse, gentlemen, we will not be doing the horse a great wrong. He is an old animal, and I do not think that he will mind dying very much, now that he is away from the ordeal of loneliness which he feared more than death. After all, he has already had his great triumph - the climb up the cliff of gems, the jump across the volcanic vent, the rescue by people whom he wanted to find. The horse has done so well that he is really beyond us. We can help him, a little, or we can hurt him, a little; beside the immensity of his accomplishment, we cannot really do very much either way.

'No, gentlemen, we are not judging the case of the horse. We are judging space. What happens to man when he moves out into the Big Nothing? Do we leave Old Earth behind? Why did civilization fall? Will it fall again? Is civilization a gun or a blaster or a laser or a rocket? Is it even a planoform-ing ship or a pinlighter at his work? You know as well as I do, gentlemen, that civilization is not what we can do. If it had been, there would have been no fall of Ancient Man. Even in the Dark Ages they had a few fusion bombs, they could make some small guided missiles and they even had weapons like the Kaskaskia Effect, which we have never been able to rediscover. The Dark Ages weren't dark because people lost techniques or science. They were daik'because people lost people. It's a lot of work to be human and it's work which must be kept up, or it begins to fade. Gentlemen, the horse judges us.

'Take the word, gentlemeu. "Civilization" is itself a lady's

word. There were female writers in a country called France who made that word popular in the third century before space travel. To be "civilized" meant for people to be tame, to be kind, to be polished. If we kill this horse, we are wild. If we treat the horse gently, we are tame. Gentlemen, I have only one witness and that witness will utter only one word. Then you shall vote and vote freely.'

There was a murmur around the table at this announcement. Philip Vincent obviously enjoyed the excitement he had created. He let them murmur on for a full minute or two before he slapped the table gently and said, 'Gentlemen, the witness. Are you ready?'

There was a murmur of assent. Bashnack tried to say, 'It's still a question of public funds!' but his neighbours shushed him. The table became quiet. All faces turned towards the Hereditary Dictator.

'Gentlemen, the testimony. Genevieve, is-this what you yourself told me to say? Is civilization always a woman's choice first, and only later a man's?'

'Yes,' said Genevieve, with a happy, open smile.

The meeting broke up amid laughter and applause.

A month later Casher O'Neill sat in a room in a medium-size planofforming liner. They were out of reach of Pontoppidan. The Hereditary Dictator had not changed his mind and cut him down with green beams. Casher had strange memories, not bad ones for a young man.

He remembered Genevieve weeping in the garden.

'I'm romantic,' she cried, and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of his cape. 'Legally I'm the owner of this planet, rich, powerful, free. But I can't leave here. I'm too important. I can't marry whom I want to marry. I'm too important. My uncle can't do what he wants to do - he's Hereditary Dictator and he always must do what the Council decides after weeks of chatter. I can't love you. You're a prince and a wanderer, with travels and battles and justice and strange things ahead of you. I can't go. I'm too important. I'm too sweet! I'm too

nice; I hate, hate, hate myself sometimes. Please, Casher, could you take a flier and run away with me into space ?'

'Your uncle's lasers could cut us to pieces before we got out.'

He held her hands and looked gently down into her face. At this moment he did not feel the fierce, aggressive, happy glow which an able young man feels in the presence of a beautiful and tender young woman. He felt something much stranger, softer, quieter - an emotion very sweet to the mind and restful to the nerves. It was the simple, clear compassion of one person for another. He took a chance for her sake, because the 'dark knowledge' was wonderful but very dangerous in the wrong hands.

He took both her beautiful little hands in his, so that she looked up at him and realized that he was not going to kiss her. Something about his stance made her realize that she was being offered a more precious gift than a sky-lit romantic kiss in a garden. Besides, it was just touching helmets.

He said to her, with passion and kindness in his voice:

'You remember that dog-woman, the one who works with the dishes in the hospital ?' •

'Of course. She was good and bright and happy, and helped us all.'

'Go work with her, now and then. Ask her nothing. Tell her nothing. Just work with her at her machines. Tell her I said so. Happiness is catching. You might catch it; I think I did myself, a little.'

'I think I understand you,' said Genevieve softly. 'Casher, good-bye and good, good luck to you. My uncle expects us.'

Together they went back into the palace.

Another memory was the farewell to Philip Vincent, the Hereditary Dictator of Pontoppidan. The calm, clean-shaven, ruddy, well-fleshed face looked at him with benign regard. Casher O'Neill felt more respect for this man when he realized that ruthlessness is often the price of peace, and vigilance the price of wealth.-

'You're a clever young man. A very clever young man. You may win back the power of your uncle Kuraf.'

'I don't want that power!' cried Casher O'Neill. 'I have advice for you,' said the Hereditary Dictator, 'and it is good advice or I would not be here to give it. I have learned the political arts well: otherwise I would not be alive. Do not refuse power. Just take it and use it wisely. Do not hide from your wicked uncle's name. Obliterate it. Take the name yourself and rule so well that, in a few decades, no one will remember your uncle. Just you. You are young. You can't win now. But it is in your fate to grow and to triumph. I know it. I am good at these things. I have given "you your weapon. I am not tricking you. It is packed safely and you may leave with it.'

Casher O'Neill was breathing softly, believing it all, and trying to think of words to thank the stout, powerful older man when the dictator added, with a little laugh in his voice:

'Thank you, too, for saving me money. You've lived up to your name, Casher.'

' Saved you money ?'

'The alfalfa. The horse wanted alfalfa.'

'Oh, that idea!' said Casher O'Neill. 'It was obvious. I don't deserve much credit for that.'

'/ didn't think of it/ said the Hereditary Dictator, 'and my staff didn't either. We're not stupid. That shows you are bright. You realized that Perino must have had a food converter to keep the horse alive in the Hippy Dipsy. All we did was set it to alfalfa and we saved ourselves the cost of a shipload of horse food twice a year. We're glad to save that credit. We're well off here, but we don't like to waste things. You may bow to me now, and leave.'

Casher O'Neill had done so, with one last glance at the lovely Genevieve, standing fragile and beautiful beside her uncle's chair.

His last memory was very recent.

He had paid two hundred thousand credits for it, right on this liner. He had found the Stop-Captain, bored now that the ship was in flight and the Go-Captain had taken over.

' Can you get me a telepathic fix on a horse ?'

'What's a horse?' said the Go-Captain. 'Where is it? Do you want to pay for it ?'

'A horse,' said Casher O'Neill patiently, 'is an unmodified earth animal. Not underpeople. A big one, but quite intelligent. This one is in orbit right around Pontoppidan. And I will pay the usual price.'

'A million Earth credits,' said the Stop-Captain.

'Ridiculous!' cried Casher O'Neill.

They settled on two hundred thousand credits for a good fix and ten thousand for the use of the ship's equipment, even if there were failure. It was not a failure. The technician was a snake-man: he was deft, cool, and superb at his job. In only a few minutes he passed the headset to Casher O'Neill, saying pelitely, 'This is it, I think.'

It was. He had reached right into the horse's rnind.

The endless sands of Mizzer swam before Casher O'Neill. The long lines of the Twelve Niles converged in the distance. He galloped steadily and powerfully. There were other horses near by, other riders, other things, but he himself was conscious only of the beat of the hooves against the strong moist sand, the firmness of the appreciative rider upon his back. Dimly, as in a hallucination, Casher O'Neill could also see the little orbital ship in which the old horse cantered in mid-air, with an amused cadet sitting on his back. Up there, with no weight, the old worn-out heart would be good for many, many years. Then he saw the horse's paradise again. The flash of hooves threatened to overtake him, but he outran them all. There was the expectation of a stable at the end, a rubdown, good succulent green food, and the glimpse of a filly in the morning.

The horse of Pontoppidan felt extremely wise. He had trusted people - people, the source of all kindness, all cruelty, all power among the stars. And the people had been good. The horse felt very much horse again. Casher felt the old body course along the river's edge like a dream of power, like a completion of service, like an ultimate fulfilment of companionship.