Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

The Dragon Detective Agency: The Case of the Vanished Sea Dragon

Written by

Gareth P. Jones

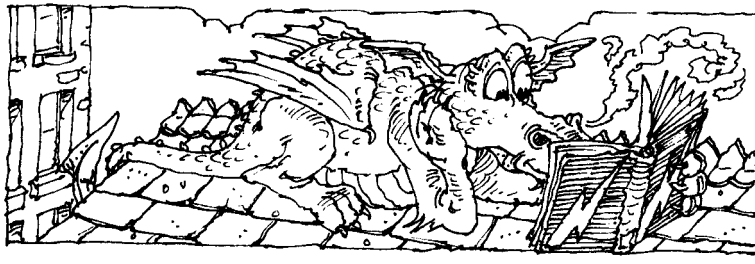
Published by

Bloomsbury

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One



The double-chinned security guard sat slumped in front of a wall of black and white TV screens. He opened his bleary eyes, yawned and pulled a doughnut from the box, biting into it and licking a globule of jam that dribbled down his chin. He was unaware that every move he made was being watched by a four-metre-long (from nose to tail), red-backed, green-bellied, urban-based Mountain Dragon, who was perfectly camouflaged against the sloping rooftop across the road.

Dirk Dilly, the dragon detective, gazed longingly at the doughnuts. He was starving. To take his mind off his rumbling stomach he opened his book at a chapter called 'Dragon Births' and read.

Once impregnated, the female dragon travels deep into the earth's belly to the banks of the Outer Core, where she lays the egg. She then picks it up in her mouth and dives into the liquid fire. This is an extremely painful experience. The mother plants the egg deep in the liquid fire and returns to the shores, where she waits for her youngling to hatch and swim to the surface.

Dirk examined an illustration of pregnant dragons waiting for their newborns to appear from the bubbling underground lake.

A Sea Dragon mother places her egg relatively near the surface of the fiery lake, giving its offspring's skin the ability to soften in water. A Mountain Dragon's egg is planted deeper into the lava, making the child's back tougher and its flame stronger. Of all subspecies it is the Sky Dragon that buries its egg deepest.

It takes weeks for a young Skyling to swim to the surface, by which time the fire has become an integral part of its composition, giving it the rare power known as 'sublimation'. This is the ability to instantaneously turn its entire body into cloud-like gas.

Dirk looked up from the book. Nothing had changed. The screens still showed the interior of an art gallery located above a doughnut shop in a busy London street. Being night-time the doors were locked, but they may well have stayed locked during the days for all the visitors the art gallery got. In spite of its central location few passers-by knew of its existence and even fewer bothered to go up. Most were more interested in the selection of mouth-watering, calorie-laden sugar-coated doughnuts downstairs than the drab paintings upstairs.

Dirk had been watching the gallery every night since he got the call from a plummy-voiced man who had introduced himself as Mr Strettingdon-Smythe, the curator of the galley.

'Important pieces are going missing,' Mr Strettingdon-Smythe said over the phone.

'Don't you have security?' replied Dirk, holding the receiver between his shoulder and his long pointy ear and reaching for his glass of neat orange squash.

'Yes, but he's useless, always asleep on the job.'

'Why don't you fire him?' asked Dirk, draining the contents of the glass.

'I wish I could but he's a relative of the owner.'

'What about CCTV?'

'Every room is monitored but the picture goes fuzzy whenever a painting goes missing, like it's being . . .' Mr Strettingdon-Smythe paused, reaching for the right word, '. . . interfered with somehow.'

'Why don't you go to the police?' asked Dirk.

'The owner says it's bad for business. I can't see how business could be any worse. Hardly anyone ever comes to the gallery. Perhaps we should show pictures of doughnuts,' said the curator bitterly.

Mr Strettingdon-Smythe explained that there had been four thefts so far, each following the same pattern. Late at night the CCTV would go haywire for around an hour, while the thieves removed one painting without breaking a window, setting off the alarmed door or showing any signs of forced entry. In each case the broken frame was left behind. Only the picture itself was taken.

It sounded intriguing. Dirk agreed to take on the case.

'And, Mr Dilly,' added Mr Strettingdon-Smythe, 'I'd appreciate utmost discretion. I haven't told the owner I hired you. I know he would disapprove but I can't bear to have any more pieces go missing. Please don't let anyone see you.'

'Believe me, it would be a bigger problem for me

than for you if I got seen,' replied Dirk, hanging up.

His first thought was that it had to be an inside job. The obvious suspect was the double-chinned security guard but, after a few days following him, Dirk uncovered no signs of guilt. During the day he worked on the security desk of an office building. He had a cheery nature and enjoyed greeting every employee by name. After a full day's work he headed to the art gallery, via the doughnut shop, and spent the evening stuffing his face and dozing off. He was incompetent but he wasn't corrupt.

The question that bothered Dirk was why the thieves didn't take the whole lot in one go? Why take one painting at a time, risking capture with each return visit? It didn't make any sense and, after almost two weeks staking out the gallery, Dirk was no closer to getting any answers.

He opened his book and read another paragraph.

The only way to tell if a Sky Dragon has recently materialised is by the dragon-shaped trace of ash it leaves behind on the ground. However, the process of changing from solid matter into a gas state and vice versa is painful and not one Sky Dragons do lightly. Precious little is known about Sky Dragons (even

amongst other dragons), although some claim that they can distil water from the clouds and create powerful walls of fire out of nowhere.

Since dragonkind went into hiding it is generally believed that all of the world's Sky Dragons have remained in a 'sublimated' state.

So whenever you notice a dragon-shaped cloud drifting across the sky you are probably looking at a Sky Dragon.

The book was called *Dragonlore* and it was written by his landlady's late husband, Ivor Klingerflim. It worried Dirk that a human could know so much about dragons. There was a chapter on eating habits, correctly identifying all dragons as vegetarians. There were chapters on how different types of dragon varied in appearance, strength and powers. It was correct in every detail, such as the ability to blend being a skill unique to Mountain Dragons, or yellow-backed Scavengers having extremely bad breath, due to their diet of cow manure and garlic. There were even types of dragon he had never encountered, like the Californian Desert Dragons, who apparently had spikes sticking out of their backs and spat poison instead of breathing fire.

He had no idea how Ivor had learnt so much, but was relieved when Mrs Klingerflim had said that he could only afford to print a hundred or so copies.

'He spent his whole life studying dragons,' she explained.

'So weren't you surprised when you discovered that I was one?' Dirk asked, feeling foolish, always having assumed that Mrs Klingerflim's poor eyesight was the reason that she didn't scream when she first saw him.

'Very little surprises you when you get to my age,' replied the old lady, 'except for ice cream.'

'Ice cream?' said Dirk.

'Oh yes, all the new flavours they keep bringing out. Cheesecake this and monkey nuts that. I can't keep up. We only had vanilla, chocolate and strawberry when I was a little girl. Ivor used to say that one day he would invent a beer-flavoured ice cream and make his millions. He was a silly man,' she said fondly. 'Mind you,' she added with a wink, 'I wouldn't be surprised if there is such a thing now.'

The double-chinned security guard fell asleep, dropping the half-eaten doughnut on to the floor. Dirk was about to open the book again when he noticed the CCTV screens flicker and the picture disappear.

He checked the street below. At the bus stop a few late-night party-goers were waiting for the night bus home, eating revolting-looking kebabs, and dripping chilli sauce on the pavement. None of them looked up. Londoners rarely did.

He flew to the large window and peered inside the gallery. There was no sign of a break-in but, on the far wall, a painting of a sad-looking lady had fallen to the floor, shattering the glass.

Dirk pushed his nose to the window and saw the picture lift itself out of the frame and move across the floor.

He pushed the window open and entered the gallery. It was risky but he knew the CCTV cameras were still out. Standing on his hind legs, he surveyed the gallery. No sign of anyone. In one corner of the room was a small red light. He bent down and inspected it. The light was coming from a black sphere about the size of a golf ball. Dirk picked it up.

'So that's how they're scrambling the cameras,' he said to himself.

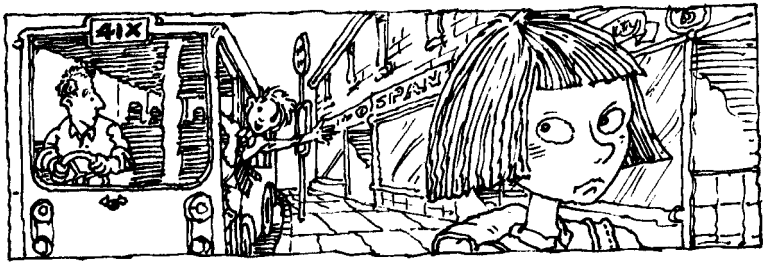
He tucked the black sphere behind his wing and noticed a second blinking light on a white box attached to the ceiling. Realising what it was, he clasped his paw over his nostrils but it was too late to

stop the thin line of grey smoke drift up from his nose, through the room, into a vent in the small box. Dirk knew exactly what would happen now. The smoke particles would neutralise the ions, causing a drop in current between the two plates in the ionisation chamber, triggering the smoke alarm.

'Rats,' he muttered, as the ringing sound filled the room. Case or no case, he couldn't afford to be seen by a human. He got to the window and jumped to the roof across the road. The double-chinned security guard entered the room, holding a bucket of sand, with dried jam smeared across both chins. Not noticing the painting moving across the floor, the large man tripped over it, sending the bucket in the air, spraying sand across the room, before landing with a CLUNK on the floor.

Dirk blended with the roof, where he could see that the security cameras had come back on and were recording the farcical scene inside the gallery from various angles. Dirk was relieved he had got out in time. To be seen by a human was to breach the forbidden divide between dragonkind and mankind. Mrs Klingerflim and Holly were human, of course, but that was different. Mrs K and Holly were his friends.

Chapter Two



Holly Bigsby got off the bus at the stop near her house and hastily headed down the road in the opposite direction.

'Oi, Holly Hockey Sticks,' shouted Archie Snellgrove, following her off the bus.

She quickened her pace.

'Are we going for tea and scones?' jeered Archie's ginger-haired friend, in what Holly guessed was supposed to be a posh voice.

She didn't turn her head. She had to lose them. If Archie discovered where she lived he would make the whole summer a nightmare. He had certainly gone out of his way to make her last two months as

miserable as possible.

When she had arrived at Gristle Street Comprehensive, Archie had honed in on her like a heat-seeking missile, taking every available opportunity to humiliate her in public and make his friends laugh. He started off with fairly general jokes but when he had learnt that her dad had worked for the Ministry of Defence he quickly worked it into his routine.

'Hey, Bigsby, will you lend us a hand . . .' he would start before pausing for comic effect, pushing his dirty blond hair away from his face then adding, '. . . grenade? A hand grenade, get it? . . . Oi, Biggles, is it true you've got bullet-proof pants? . . . Oi, Beggars-be, do you keep your fish in a fish tank or an armoured tank?'

Holly was determined not to rise to it. She couldn't afford to get into trouble. Dad had made it clear that even though he had lost his job and they didn't have as much money coming in now, one step out of line and she would be packed off back to William Scrivener School, which she had hated because it was so far away from her home and her cat, Willow, and her only friend, Dirk Dilly.

More recently Archie had grown tired of army jokes

and decided she must be posh, taunting her with names like 'Posh Girl', 'Lady Penelope' and his new favourite, 'Holly Hockey Sticks'.

She didn't know what grudge he had against her but she was sure she hadn't done anything to deserve it. Every single evening he followed her home, trying to discover where she lived, so he could extend her torment beyond school hours, but every time she had managed to lose him.

Finally, the end of term had come. There would be no more Archie for six weeks, providing she could lose him one more time. She glanced at the boys in a car wing mirror, making sure she had enough time for a getaway.

'Will mummy be making caviar for tea?' shouted Archie, making his friend laugh.

This upset Holly more than Archie could have known. She drew a deep breath. Letting Archie know that her mum was dead would give him months' worth of material.

Besides, Holly didn't talk to anyone about her mum's death. Not even her dad. Holly sped up. She needed just a little more distance to lose Archie and his friend.

'Is one in a hurry? Does one need to feed the

corgis?' shouted Archie, laughing loudly.

Holly broke into a run, turning a corner and another into a drive that led to a row of garages. She ran full pelt towards them. It was a dead end.

Archie's friend yelled, 'She's gone down there.'

Their approaching footsteps echoed around the walls. She ran to the garage door in the far corner and pushed herself against it. They were almost within sight. With all her concentration she focused on what it would feel like to be a dark green garage door.

Archie and his friends rounded the corner and stopped in their tracks.

'Where did she go?' exclaimed Archie.

'She must have gone over the roofs,' said his friend.

'How could she have done? No one's that quick. We'd be able to see her climbing up there.'

'What else could she have done?'

'I dunno.' Archie grinned. 'Maybe she can fly.'

'That's mental,' said his friend.

Archie looked at the garages. His pale blue eyes drifted past Holly. He scratched his head in confusion, ruffling his dirty blond hair.

'Maybe she's invisible,' he suggested.

'People can't turn invisible,' scoffed his friend.

Holly wasn't invisible. Not entirely. If Archie and his

friend had looked carefully they would have seen her brown eyes and the faint outline of the girl, standing perfectly blended with the garage door behind her.

Archie said, 'She's quick. I'll give her that. She ain't here. Come on.'

Holly waited until they were gone then smiled, causing her mouth to reappear. Certain that no one was watching she shifted, and her natural colour returned completely. She had never intended to taste dragon blood. She had only been trying to identify the sticky green liquid that had rubbed off Dirk's injured body when he had come to find her at her last school. She certainly hadn't known that by tasting Dirk's blood she would gain some of his powers, but, over the last couple of months, she had become increasingly grateful for this extra advantage she had over Archie Snellgrove.