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Opening extract from

# The Reluctant Dragon

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*They knew that book-learning often came in useful at a pinch*

Long ago – might have been hundreds of years ago – in a cottage half-way between an English village and the shoulder of the Downs a shepherd lived with his wife and their little son. Now the shepherd spent his days – and at certain times of the year his nights too – up on the wide ocean-bosom of the Downs, with only the sun and the stars and the sheep for company, and the friendly

chattering world of men and women far out of sight and hearing. But his little son, when he wasn't helping his father, and often when he was as well, spent much of his time buried in big volumes that he borrowed from the affable gentry and interested parsons of the country round about. And his parents were very fond of him, and rather proud of him too, though they didn't let on in his hearing, so he was left to go his own way and read as much as he liked; and instead of frequently getting a cuff on the side of the head, as might very well have happened to him, he was treated more or less as an equal by his parents, who sensibly thought it a very fair division of labour that they should supply the practical knowledge, and he the book-learning. They

knew that book-learning often came in useful at a pinch, in spite of what their neighbours said.



*. . . buried in big volumes*

What the Boy chiefly dabbled in was natural history and fairytales, and he just took them as they came, in a sandwichy sort of way, without making any distinctions; and really his course of reading strikes one as rather sensible.

One evening the shepherd, who for some nights past had been disturbed and pre-occupied, and off his usual mental balance, came home all of a tremble, and, bursting into

the room where his wife and son were peacefully employed, she with her seam, he in following out the adventures of the Giant with no Heart in his Body, exclaimed with much agitation:

'It's all up with me, Maria! Never no more can I go up on them there Downs, was it ever so!'

'Now don't you take on like that,' said his wife, who was a *very* sensible woman: 'but tell us all about it first, whatever it is as has given you this shake-up, and then me and you and the son here, between us, we ought to be able to get to the bottom of it!'

'It began some nights ago,' said the shepherd. 'You know that cave up there – I never liked it, somehow, and the sheep never

liked it neither, and when sheep don't like a thing there's generally some reason for it. Well, for some time past there's been faint noises coming from that cave – noises like heavy sighings, with grunts mixed up in them; and sometimes a snoring, far away down – *real* snoring, yet somehow not *honest* snoring, like you and me o'nights, you know!'

'*I* know,' remarked the Boy quietly.

'Of course I was terrible frightened,' the shepherd went on; 'yet somehow I couldn't keep away. So this very evening, before I come down, I took a cast round by the cave, quietly. And there – O Lord there I saw him at last, as plain as I see you!'

'Saw *who?*' said his wife, beginning to share her husband's nervous terror.



*I saw him at last, as plain as I see you!*

'Why *him*, I'm a-telling you!' said the shepherd. 'He was sticking half-way out of the cave, and seemed to be enjoying of the cool of the evening in a poetical sort of way. He was as big as four cart-horses, and all covered with shiny scales – deep-blue scales at the top of him, shading off to a tender sort o' green below. As he breathed, there

was that sort of flicker over his nostrils that you see over our chalk roads on a baking windless day in summer. He had his chin on his paws, and I should say he was meditating about things. Oh, yes, a peaceable sort o' beast enough, and not ramping or carrying on or doing anything but what was quite right and proper. I admit all that. And yet, what am I to do? *Scales*, you know, and claws, and a tail for certain, though I didn't see that end of him – I ain't *used* to 'em, and I don't *hold* with 'em, and that's a fact!'

The Boy, who had apparently been absorbed in his book during his father's recital, now closed the volume, yawned, clasped his hands behind his head, and said sleepily:

'It's all right, Father. Don't you worry. It's only a dragon.'

'Only a dragon?' cried his father. 'What do you mean, sitting there, you and your dragons? *Only* a dragon indeed! And what do *you* know about it?'

"Cos it *is*, and 'cos I *do* know,' replied the Boy, quietly. 'Look here, Father, you know we've each of us got our line. *You* know about sheep, and weather, and things; *I* know about dragons. I always said, you know, that that cave up there was a dragon-cave. I always said it must have belonged to a dragon some time, and ought to belong to a dragon now, if rules count for anything. Well, now you tell me it *has* got a dragon, and so *that's* all right. I'm not half as much surprised as when you told

me it *hadn't* got a dragon. Rules always come right if you wait quietly. Now, please, just leave this all to me. And I'll stroll up tomorrow morning – no, in the morning I can't, I've got a whole heap of things to do – well, perhaps in the evening, if I'm quite free, I'll go up and have a talk to him, and you'll find it'll be all right. Only, please, don't you go worrying round there without me. You don't understand 'em a bit, and they're very sensitive, you know!'

'He's quite right, Father,' said the sensible mother. 'As he says, dragons is his line and not ours. He's wonderful knowing about book-beasts, as every one allows. And to tell the truth, I'm not half happy in my own mind, thinking of that poor animal lying alone up

there, without a bit o' hot supper or anyone to change the news with; and maybe we'll be able to do something for him; and if he ain't quite respectable our Boy'll find it out quick enough. He's got a pleasant sort o' way with him that makes everybody tell him everything.'

Next day, after he'd had his tea, the Boy strolled up the chalky track that led to the summit of the Downs; and there, sure enough, he found the dragon, stretched lazily on the sward in front of his cave. The view from that point was a magnificent one. To the right and left, the bare and billowy leagues of Downs; in front, the vale, with its clustered homesteads, its threads of white roads running through orchards and well-tilled acreage, and, far away, a hint of grey old

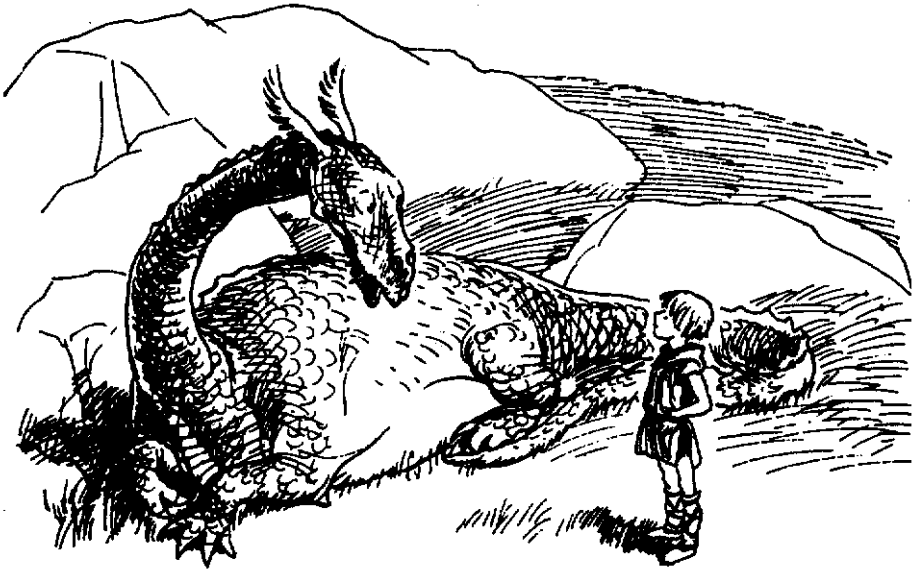
cities on the horizon. A cool breeze played over the surface of the grass and the silver shoulder of a large moon was showing above distant junipers. No wonder the dragon seemed in a peaceful and contented mood; indeed, as the Boy approached he could hear the beast purring with a happy regularity. 'Well, we live and learn!' he said to himself. 'None of my books ever told me that dragons purred!'

'Hullo, dragon!' said the Boy, quietly, when he had got up to him.

The dragon, on hearing the approaching footsteps, made the beginning of a courteous effort to rise. But when he saw it was a Boy, he set his eyebrows severely.

'Now don't you hit me,' he said; 'or bung

*Now don't you hit me*



stones, or squirt water, or anything. I won't have it, I tell you!'

'Not goin' to hit you,' said the Boy wearily, dropping on the grass beside the beast: 'and don't, for goodness' sake, keep on saying "Don't"; I hear so much of it, and it's monotonous, and makes me tired. I've simply

looked in to ask you how you were and all that sort of thing; but if I'm in the way I can easily clear out. I've lots of friends, and no one can say I'm in the habit of shoving myself in where I'm not wanted!'

'No, no, don't go off in a huff,' said the dragon, hastily; 'fact is, I'm as happy up here as the day's long; never without an occupation, dear fellow, never without an occupation! And yet, between ourselves, it *is* a trifle dull at times.'

The Boy bit off a stalk of grass and chewed it. 'Going to make a long stay here?' he asked, politely.

'Can't hardly say at present,' replied the dragon. 'It seems a nice place enough – but I've only been here a short time, and one

must look about and reflect and consider before settling down. It's rather a serious thing, settling down. Besides – now I'm going to tell you something! You'd never guess it if you tried ever so! – fact is, I'm such a confoundedly lazy beggar!'

'You surprise me,' said the Boy, civilly.

'It's the sad truth,' the dragon went on, settling down between his paws and evidently delighted to have found a listener at last; 'and I fancy that's really how I came to be here. You see all the other fellows were so active and *earnest* and all that sort of thing – always rampaging, and skirmishing, and scouring the desert sands, and pacing the margin of the sea, and chasing knights all over the place, and devouring damsels, and going on

generally – whereas I liked to get my meals regular and then to prop my back against a bit of rock and snooze a bit, and wake up and think of things going on and how they kept going on just the same, you know! So when it happened I got fairly caught.'

'When *what* happened, please?' asked the Boy.

'That's just what I don't precisely know,' said the dragon. 'I suppose the earth sneezed, or shook itself, or the bottom dropped out of something. Anyhow there was a shake and a roar and a general stramash, and I found myself miles away underground and wedged in as tight as tight. Well, thank goodness, my wants are few, and at any rate I had peace and quietness and wasn't always being asked to

come along and *do* something. And I've got such an active mind – always occupied, I assure you! But time went on, and there was a certain sameness about the life, and at last I began to think it would be fun to work my way upstairs and see what you other fellows were doing. So I scratched and burrowed, and worked this way and that way and at last I came out through this cave here. And I like the country, and the view, and the people – what I've seen of 'em – and on the whole I feel inclined to settle down here.'

'What's your mind always occupied about?' asked the Boy. 'That's what I want to know.'

The dragon coloured slightly and looked away. Presently he said bashfully:

'Did you ever – just for fun – try to make

up poetry – verses, you know?'

"Course I have,' said the Boy. 'Heaps of it. And some of it's quite good, I feel sure, only there's no one here cares about it. Mother's very kind and all that, when I read it to her, and so's Father for that matter. But somehow they don't seem to –'

'Exactly,' cried the dragon; 'my own case exactly. They don't seem to, and you can't argue with 'em about it. Now you've got culture, you have, I could tell it on you at once, and I should just like your candid opinion about some little things I threw off lightly, when I was down there. I'm awfully pleased to have met you, and I'm hoping the other neighbours will be equally agreeable. There was a very nice old gentleman up here

only last night, but he didn't seem to want to intrude.'

'That was my father,' said the Boy, 'and he *is* a nice old gentleman, and I'll introduce you some day if you like.'

'Can't you two come up here and dine or something to-morrow?' asked the dragon, eagerly. 'Only, of course, if you've got nothing better to do,' he added politely.

'Thanks awfully,' said the Boy, 'but we don't go out anywhere without my mother, and, to tell you the truth, I'm afraid she mightn't quite approve of you. You see there's no getting over the hard fact that you're a dragon, is there? And when you talk of settling down, and the neighbours, and so on, I can't help feeling that you don't quite realise

your position. You're an enemy of the human race, you see!'

'Haven't got an enemy in the world,' said the dragon, cheerfully. 'Too lazy to make 'em, to begin with. And if I *do* read other fellows my poetry, I'm always ready to listen to theirs!'

'Oh, dear!' cried the Boy. 'I wish you'd try and grasp the situation properly. When the other people find you out, they'll come after you with spears and swords and all sorts of things. You'll have to be exterminated, according to their way of looking at it! You're a scourge, and a pest, and a baneful monster!'

'Not a word of truth in it,' said the dragon, wagging his head solemnly. 'Character'll bear the strictest investigation. And now, there's a


*Not a word of truth in it*

little sonnet-thing I was working on when you appeared on the scene –'

'Oh, if you *won't* be sensible,' cried the Boy, getting up, 'I'm going off home. No, I can't stop for sonnets; my mother's sitting up. I'll look you up to-morrow, sometime or other, and do for goodness' sake try and realise that you're a pestilential scourge, or you'll find yourself in a most awful fix. Good-night!'

The Boy found it an easy matter to set the mind of his parents at ease about his new friend. They had always left that branch to him, and they took his word without a murmur. The shepherd was formally introduced and many compliments and kind inquiries were exchanged. His wife, however,

though expressing her willingness to do anything she could – to mend things, or set the cave to rights, or cook a little something when the dragon had been poring over sonnets and forgotten his meals, as male things *will* do, could not be brought to recognise him formally. The fact that he was a dragon and 'they didn't know who he was' seemed to count for everything with her. She made no objection, however, to her little son spending his evenings with the dragon quietly, so long as he was home by nine o'clock; and many a pleasant night they had, sitting on the sward, while the dragon told stories of old, old times, when dragons were quite plentiful and the world was a livelier place than it is now, and life was full of thrills and jumps and surprises.