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opening extract from

# Green Smoke

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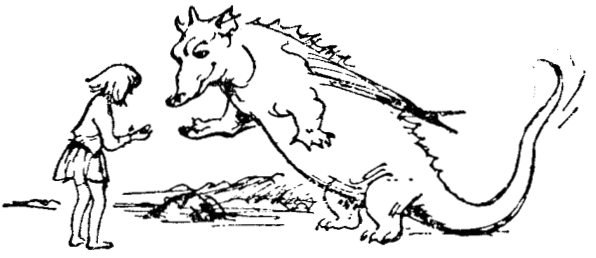
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CHAPTER ONE

## *The Puff of Green Smoke*

THIS is a story about a girl called Susan, or Sue for short, who went for a seaside holiday to Constantine Bay in Cornwall. Perhaps you have never been to Constantine Bay. Perhaps you have never even been to Cornwall. That won't matter at all. Just think of the rockiest rocks, the sandiest sand, the greenest sea and the bluest sky you can possibly imagine, and you will have some idea of Constantine Bay. At one end of it there is a high cliff with a lighthouse on top of it, and at the other end there is a great ridge of rocks jutting out into the sea. In between lies the yellow sand, and behind that, the sand dunes, with hummocks of tough grass, and little hot sandy paths running in and out like yellow streams. In fact, it is like all the best seaside places you have ever been to, rolled into one. Susan thought it the most beautiful and exciting place in the world. She had been there first when she was seven. Now she was eight, and she and her mother and father were just about to set off there again for their summer holidays.

This time, they travelled down to Cornwall by car very early in the morning, before it was really daylight. The birds were singing at the tops of their voices, the grass on the lawn was silvered over with dew, and the sky was pale green. A few stars were still shining overhead.

They arrived at Constantine Bay in the afternoon, in good time to rush down and look at the rocks and cliffs and make sure everything was in its right place, and of course it was, only a hundred times more glorious than Susan had remembered.

If you think it would be dull to go to the same place two years running, you will soon find out your mistake, for though rocks and cliffs may stay the same, you are always discovering new and exciting things about them. Or *in* them. For it was just under the cliff walk from Constantine Bay to Treyarnon, in a little, secret cove, that Susan discovered something quite different from anything she had ever seen before. It would be more polite to call him *Someone* rather than *Something*, and Susan met him the third day after they arrived. She was now old enough to scramble about the rocks by herself and that was how she came to find this person alone. I don't think she would ever have met him if her mother had been with her, for he did not care for people at all. He was shy and retiring in his habits. He lived in a deep black cave, under the cliff, which was not easy to get to, except at low tide. When the tide was high, the waves came right up to the entrance of the cave and made a deep booming sound, and sent clouds of spray into the air, right over the cliff top. When Susan met him, it was fairly soon after breakfast, and there were not many people about. She had climbed over the rocks, and was looking down at the

black mouth of the cave, and thinking it would be fun to ask her mother to come and explore it with her, when she heard a noise very like a loud sneeze, and a little puff of green smoke came out of the cave and floated away into the air. There was a moment's silence, and then another sneeze – a very, very loud one – and another puff of smoke. Then, suddenly, a screwed-up paper bag shot out of the entrance of the cave and landed upon the sands outside.

Susan had been taught that you must not leave paper bags and orange peel and lemonade bottles about, and she was very upset at the sight of that fat, bulging paper bag, lying on the clean, untouched surface of the sand. It was not far away, and being a tidy child she decided to go and bury it out of sight, so she climbed down the rocks and walked across the sands towards it. She was just going to pick it up when there was another really colossal sneeze – KER-R-R-R-CHOO-OO-OO – and a thick puff of bright green smoke blew out of the cave. Susan thought to herself that it was early for people to be having picnics in caves, and sneezing, but who could it be if it wasn't picnickers? She began to dig a little hole in the sand with her fingers so that she could drop the paper bag into it. It felt as if it was full of eggshells. Susan opened the bag and peered inside. It *was* eggshells, and two or three crusts of bread, and a strong smell of pepper. Sue's nose began to tickle and she rubbed it to stop herself sneezing. Somebody had been having hard-boiled eggs for breakfast. They must have lit a fire to boil the eggs on and that was what had caused the puffs of smoke.

'People are lucky,' thought Sue, rubbing her nose hard. 'We've had dinner picnics, and tea picnics, and

even, once, a supper picnic after the carnival, but we've never had a *breakfast* picnic. It would be gorgeous to eat hard-boiled eggs, cooked over a fire in a cave.'

She put the bag into the hole, covered it with sand, and was just about to go back to the rocks to ask her mother if they couldn't have a breakfast picnic the very next day, when a voice said:

'Thank you for burying my bag. You are a very tidy little girl. Quite different from most, if I may say so.'

Susan turned and looked back at the cave, but she could not see the owner of the voice.

'You shouldn't have thrown it out,' she said, sternly.

'I'm sorry,' said a humble voice. 'I didn't like to come out and bury it myself.'

'Why not?' asked Susan.

'I didn't want people to see me.'

Susan thought this was rather odd, and could only work out one reason why whoever it was couldn't come out.

'Have you been bathing and lost all your clothes?' she asked.

'No,' said the voice. 'There are other reasons.'

Susan thought for a moment.

'Shall I guess?' she said at last.

'Do,' answered the voice. 'But you'll never get the right answer. Never.'

'Are you too ugly?'

'Certainly not!' The voice sounded indignant.

'Have you – have you broken your leg and can't move?'

'All my legs are quite sound, thank you.'

'*All* your legs?' asked Susan.

'*All* my legs,' answered the voice firmly.

'It sounds as if you've got several.'

'Perhaps I have,' said the voice, and chuckled. A tiny green puff of smoke floated out on the air.

Susan was extremely interested.

'Several legs,' she murmured. 'I've only got two.'

'They must get tired on long walks, if you've only got two,' observed the voice.

'Are you a centipede?' asked Susan, suddenly remembering a creature that she knew had lots of legs.

'A centipede? Of course not,' said the voice.

'Well,' said Susan, 'my last guess is that you're so comfortable that it doesn't seem worth moving.'

'All wrong,' cried the voice triumphantly. 'All, all wrong. Ha! ha! ha! I knew you'd never guess.'

'Well, then, tell me,' said Susan, who was getting rather tired of a conversation with someone she couldn't see, who had several legs.

'If I tell you,' said the voice, and it sounded very sweet and kind, 'you won't be frightened, will you? I am so enjoying my talk with you. I haven't talked to anyone for a very, very long time.'

'I believe you're a fairy,' cried Susan, suddenly struck with this bright thought. 'A special kind of fairy with lots of legs. Perhaps a Cornish one.'

'Not a fairy,' said the voice, 'though I am Cornish. I'm a dragon.'

Susan stood quite still.

'You're not frightened, are you?' asked the voice, pleadingly. 'I have very gentle ways now.'

Susan was not quite sure that she believed that whoever it was could be a dragon. Its voice sounded so undragon-like.

'Are you really a dragon?' she asked.

'Shall I come and show you?'

'Yes,' said Susan bravely.

'Is there anyone else about? Shan't come if there is. Some people are so nasty about dragons.'

'I'm not,' said Susan. 'I'm longing to see you, and there's no one else here, so do come out.'

She had to screw up her courage to say this, because, after all, dragons can be rather alarming creatures. But Sue was stuffed full of curiosity, and she couldn't bear to go back till she had made sure whether the voice belonged to a real dragon or not. She was used to grown-ups pretending to be things that they are not.

Out of the cave came a green, scaly foot, well furnished with claws. Sue stepped back a little. It was safer to be near the rocks, she thought. Another foot appeared, and above it a large head, long like a horse's head, but bright green in colour and shining like glass. The creature had two ears and a pair of golden-yellow horns, very highly polished. His eyes were large and yellow too, like gleaming lamps. He did not look at all frightening. He seemed to have no teeth, and his wide, wide mouth was set in a charming smile.

'Shall I come out any further?' he asked.

'Well,' began Sue, and hesitated.

'I promise I won't eat you,' said the dragon. 'I never eat anyone nowadays. I've quite changed my habits.'

'Well,' said Susan again. 'I'd love to see your tail. Have you got a long one?'

The dragon turned slowly round, and Susan could see his scaly back, along the top of which were rows of yellow fins, rather like a fish's, only much bigger, and

then he slowly uncoiled several yards of emerald green tail, decorated with yellow scales arranged in patterns. Laid close against his back, tidily folded, were his wings, which, like his tail, were green and scaly, and patterned with gold.

'Now are you sure I'm a dragon?' he said, and his voice sounded impatient.

'Oh, yes,' said Susan. 'I'm quite sure now. You couldn't be anything else. Why were you sneezing? Have you got a bad cold?'

'Well,' answered the dragon, 'I'll tell you. I often find bits of food left over by picnic parties, and eat them up for breakfast or supper – paste sandwiches, shrimps, apples, jam turnovers – little things like that, you know. And last night I found a bag with a hard-boiled egg in it, and a lot of eggshells. I thought I'd have it for breakfast, but when I opened the bag, I found that the horrid people had left lots of salt and pepper in it as well, and it got up my nose and made me sneeze.'

Now that the sneezes were explained, Susan quite forgot to ask about the green smoke. Suddenly she remembered her mother. She knew she ought to be getting back, but she didn't want to hurt the dragon's feelings. He seemed so eager to talk to her. So she said, as politely as she knew how:

'Would you mind very much if I went back now?'

'I should mind,' he answered at once. 'You're such a nice little girl. So different from the silly creatures that run away from me screaming.'

'Why do they scream?' asked Sue with interest, forgetting about her mother for the moment.

'They think I'm going to eat them.'

'Well, you do eat people, in stories,' said Sue.

'Oh, stories!' said the dragon scornfully. 'Stories in your human books, I suppose, written by people who never saw a dragon in their lives.'

'Have you *never* eaten people, then?' asked Susan. She was particularly interested in this question because her mother had not long ago read her a story in which a dragon nearly gobbled up an unfortunate girl who was tied to a rock.

The dragon blushed. His green cheeks turned a rosy red, so that they looked rather like half-ripe apples.

'Well,' he answered, 'I did eat some. Long ago.' He gazed far away into the distance, avoiding Susan's eyes. 'But I haven't eaten one for many centuries. I have learnt nicer habits.'

'That's a good thing,' said Susan, briskly. 'I don't want you to eat me. We couldn't go on talking if you did. Your voice would sound very funny to me if I were inside your tummy, and I don't expect you'd hear me at all.'

'We won't try,' said the dragon, hastily.

'If you *are* hungry,' said Sue, 'I've got a bun in my pocket. I was going to eat it for elevenses yesterday, but I was so excited at seeing everything again that I forgot. I'll give you half, if you like.'

'I would like it very much,' said the dragon. 'Is there any sugar on it?'

'A little,' answered Sue, dividing it in half with her sandy fingers. 'But most of it got rubbed off in my pocket.'

'Never mind,' said the dragon politely. 'Even half a bun *without* sugar on it is worth having.'

He held out his green paw for the piece of bun and took several small bites out of it.

'You've got nicer manners than me,' observed Sue, with surprise, licking her fingers which were sugary and crumby. 'Much nicer. Do tell me, dragon, did your father and mother teach you manners, or did you learn them at school? They're so polite. Like people in a book.'

'I learnt them at the court of King Arthur,' said the dragon calmly. 'That's where I learnt them. At the court of King Arthur.'

His eyes became dreamy as he repeated the words. Now Susan had been to see King Arthur's castle, which is in Cornwall at a place called Tintagel. She knew that Arthur had been a great and noble king, who lived hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Her eyes opened very wide.

'Did you know King Arthur?' she asked.

'I knew him extremely well,' answered the dragon, proudly, arching his beautiful, bright green neck.

'You are a wonderful dragon!' cried Sue, full of admiration. 'Will you tell me all about him?'

'I will if you'll come and see me again,' said the dragon. 'It would take too long now.'

'Oh, I will, I will!' cried Sue, and then suddenly remembering her mother, she added hastily: 'I really must be getting back now or Mummy will wonder what's happened to me. But of course I will come again. What shall I do? Just call out: "Dragon!" or something like that?'

'Oh, no,' said the dragon, hastily. 'That would never do. Someone might hear you. No, just come down near the cave, and if there is no one about, sing me a dragon-

charming song, in a soft, careless sort of way – as if you were singing one of your nursery rhymes.'

'I don't know a dragon-charming song,' confessed Sue.

'Don't know one?' replied the dragon, with surprise. 'Well, well. How odd. You must learn one.'

'But how?' asked Sue despairingly.

'You'll find it under your pillow,' called the dragon over his shoulder, and disappeared into the cave.

Sue scrambled away quickly over the rocks, and found her mother, dozing on the beach in the sun.

'Mummy!' she cried breathlessly, 'I've found a dragon!'

'A dragon? Good!' said her mother, who was never surprised at anything.

'But he doesn't want to see you,' went on Sue. 'Only me. He doesn't like grown-up people very much.'

'Dragons never do,' said Sue's mother.

'So you won't mind if I go and see him sometimes, will you – without you, Mummy?'

'Of course not, darling,' answered her mother. So that was settled very easily.

When Susan arrived back at the cottage after they had had a picnic lunch on the beach, she rushed into her bedroom and felt under her pillow. Sure enough, there was a piece of paper – rather thick, yellow paper – and on it was written some poetry in a very odd writing, which Susan found very difficult to read. It looked like this:




After looking at this for some time, Susan found she could make out the words, which were these:

*Dragons are red, dilly, dilly,*
*Dragons are green.*
*You're the best dragon, dilly, dilly,*
*I've ever seen.*

When Susan had read this through slowly several times, she realized that it went to the tune of 'Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly,' so she practised singing it that night in her bath, till she had got it quite perfect, and then she planned to go straight to the cave as soon as she arrived on the beach the next day. When she came back from her bath and climbed into bed, she found that the piece of paper had gone, and though she looked everywhere she never saw it again.