

# The Lost and Lonely Dragon

By Richard Tornello

Once upon a time in a lush mountain setting there lived a very lonely and unhappy dragon.

In the land of his birth, dragons were respected for their wisdom and beauty, but he now lived in a world where humans despised dragons. In fact, dragons were considered evil, monsters who brought chaos and death, and thus always targets for unprovoked attacks by any fool in armor who encountered them. Thus, although the land itself was beautiful, the dragon thought he could never be happy there.

He vaguely remembered his old home, having left it when he was oh so young. He had been flying high over the ocean, doing aerial acrobatics, a favorite past time of his. To rest, he then spread his wings. He was gliding and was basking in the sunlight, when he had been caught unawares in a terrible typhoon. Never having flown so high and so long, without the older dragons to guide him or familiar landmarks, he could not find his way back home.

After many nasty experiences with people in this world, the dragon had withdrawn to a place away where he felt no one would ever find him, in the great mountain forest far away from those who would do him harm -- which, sadly, seemed to be any living thing on two legs. Animals and birds, on the other hand, feared him at first, then accepted his presence when they learned he meant no harm.

Even though his memories of home were fading as time went on (for dragons live for a very long time), he knew deep in his heart that he missed the good people and animals of his home world. Sad and alone he said to himself over again, "Dragons don't cry. I'm secure here, I have the animals. I am alone but safe."

It would have been more accurate to say that he was safe -- but alone, for the loneliness seemed to weigh more heavily with every year that passed.

But circumstances change -- and when they have been very unkind for a long, long time, sometimes they change for the better.

In the worlds of men and women wars are a common occurrence. Though they cause great suffering and not too much good comes from them, humans have persisted in this ritual bloodletting throughout the ages. And wars are always followed by famine and pestilence. Thus it was that the people of one village, whole families, had to flee their homeland, its fields rendered infertile, its waters tainted.

They unknowingly took refuge in the dragon's lonely wooded and mountainous home. It was so far away from all that had gone on, from roads and marketplaces and castles, no one had ever bothered to explore it. It was almost as if the land was invisible or forgotten. It certainly was not located on any current map.

The refugees that entered the forest had very little food left, almost no shelter except for crude tents made of cloth and fur stretched over wood gathered from the forest floor, and winter was approaching. The leaves were changing color and falling to the ground like red and gold rain; the geese flew in large flocks almost blackening the sky; and the little animals disappeared as they began their winter hibernations. And the people were tired and frightened to the point where they lacked the will to use the few tools they had salvaged to build houses or gather more food.

War does that to people even after the conflicts are over. The scars remain.

Dragons have keen eyesight and incredible hearing. Dragons also have the gift of understanding. They have no trouble with different languages. All languages are the same to them. Thus it was that the dragon saw the refugees arrive and overheard their conversations long before they got close and set up camp. He knew what he had to do.

When the people reached the base of the mountain they discovered food, lumber for shelter and other items that the dragon thought they might require.

"How did this happen? Who could have done this? Is it for us?"

Of course the dragon was not so foolish as to come out of hiding and say, "It was ME! No thanks required. I only wanted to help."

The people looked around and found no notes, letters or tracks for that matter. It was as if all this bounty

appeared out of the air.

The days passed. Autumn turned to winter, with snow drifts higher than a man's head, but heartened by the unexpected charity of their unknown benefactor, the people had built sturdy homes with the materials provided. The dragon watched over them, and when he saw or heard that the people needed more wood, or meat or other foodstuffs, he would deliver them to the center of the new village, melting a clearing in the head-high snow.

The dragon managed to assist the people as they themselves grew stronger and more settled. You might ask how the dragon was never spotted. Dragons have a cloak of invisibility! Dragons are born with the skill. They are able to bend light around them so that only a careful observer can see even the faintest trace. Dragons can cloak and uncloak at will

Day after day they attempted to discover their great benefactor, to no avail. The Dragon cared for them as his own not looking for benefit or power. That was the dragon's nature. It mattered little if the humans knew it was their "local dragon" who out of the kindness of his heart kept them alive in the first rough year. This would have been considered normal dragon kindness in his old home.

As it was wont to happen, one day the Dragon, tired after his exertions, let his cloak "fall" as he rested under a great cedar tree. Where that tree came from in this forest I will never know. It was the biggest tree in the whole forest. There was nothing like it. It was the dragon's favorite tree. He seemed to feel he some received nourishment from its perfume.

Around the same time the dragon was dozing two children came upon him. They had been wandering through the woods. The two looked at each other and back at the dragon and then to each other again. They smiled. They picked up some tree limbs and acting like soldiers began to attack the dragon. They were really too young to know better but old enough to know this was a good and proper action for the given situation. They were not afraid.

They poked and prodded, banged and yelled all sorts of things. They did a dance around the sleeping dragon.

The dragon became aroused as one would by a fly buzzing around while one slept. He opened one eye to see just where this bothersome noise was coming from. He spied the two and let them continue their attacks for a while. Then he realized, What's all this! They can see me! How can they see me? He realized he had "dropped his cloak" before he dozed off. He awoke fully, quickly and alert! His head turned around to face his two attackers who were yelling and laughing until the two big dragon eyes bore down on them. The two children stopped immediately.

The dragon inquired gently, "Children, just what are the two of you attempting to accomplish here? And more importantly, why?"

"You're a Dragon," the smaller of the two replied quickly. "Yes, and we are soldiers and we are supposed to slay you" said the other. Both were nodding in agreement.

The dragon breathed in a deep sad breath and sighed asking. "Why must you slay me? Have I done anything to harm you?"

"No, you're a Dragon. It's the rules," one of them shouted. They renewed their attack.

Brave little ones, he thought. And aloud, he asked, "And who made those rules?" over the clatter of their wooden tree branch weapons banging harmlessly off his armored body.

The children never had contact with a real Dragon before. They had only heard stories about dragons. They stopped their attack. The two children looked at each other and back at the Dragon and each other. They shrugged their shoulders. "Just because," said one. "Yes, just because," said the other.

"'Just because' is not a real reason for anything when you think about it, is it?" the Dragon asked.

The children had no answer and were puzzled.

The Dragon gestured for them to sit, which they did without fear.

They sat by his tail and wondered what was to happen to them. But they were not worried. They had barely escaped the fringes of a war and had seen the wounded and the dead on their journey here. They had seen men fight 'just because'. In other words, they had seen worse than a sleepy inquisitive dragon.

As if the Dragon could read their minds, he said, "Well first, I'm not going to hurt you, just because."

The children giggled.

"And I'm not going to hurt you for a real cause, either, since I don't have one -- hitting me with sticks did no harm, so it doesn't count. How's that for starters?"

"OK. We like that," both of them said while nodding in full agreement. Intuitively they both knew if something bad were going to happen it would have occurred.

"Good." The dragon smiled inwardly (not that any one could tell from a dragon's facial expressions anyway).

The dragon was now serious when he inquired, "Now answer me this, how did you two get here? Why aren't you with your families?"

"That's easy an one," said by the smallest. "We are all looking for the person or people who gave us the food and supplies. They never show themselves. We think it's magic. The adults don't know what to think. They want to thank who ever it may be."

The dragon thought, That is good to know -- but at this point in time I'm not sure anyone would believe me, or these two youngsters here. What to do, what to do...

Aloud, he said, "Listen you two. I will help you find your benefactor." He did whatever dragons do instead of crossing their fingers -- dragon's talons, while surprisingly deft, are not made for crossing. He continued, "However you must never mention me or that you met me until I tell you. You may meet me here and I will have some information or some assistance for you, your family and your quest. If they ask, simply tell them you found it under this tree. You won't be lying since I will leave what I find and what you require under it. OK?" The dragon was unsure of this plan. After all, these two had attacked him, and they represented the thinking of the villagers. But he decided to take the chance.

"Okay," they responded to his question.

"See you tomorrow. By the way, what do you think the elders could use most?"

"Books, nails, tools, supplies for household activities... and toys," they added sheepishly.

The Dragon's heart thumped and he raised his head slightly. "Books? What kind of books?"

"We're not sure. We do want to educate everyone. Everyone reads writes, does mathematics and science. We have few books since we left our homes during the wars."

Hmmm, thought the Dragon. In the old abandoned city on the other side of the mountain there was a library. It had been well-made; even after years or decades of neglect, it remained intact, the books and papers inside dry and perfectly preserved. The rest of the city was almost as sound. It was the dragon's second home especially in very bad weather, when dragon-sized dry spots were hard to find. The Dragon read here every chance he got. He was a voracious reader. The subjects didn't matter. This was his second home.

The refugees had passed near the city on their way here. The dragon would learn in time that any place where he spent enough time cloaked became harder to see. Perhaps if they had been less tired, less hungry, and less afraid, they might have investigated the area, but knowing only that it made them uncomfortable to look in that direction, they had bypassed the whole place as if in a dream.

The Dragon gave some thought to the requests. Basic requirements I can do easily enough. Books are another question, for other reasons.... Removing the books from the library would risk damaging them. He would have to guide someone to the library. That would take some doing and trust. Trust would have to earned from by the dragon and less so by the children.

Over time the dragon supplied the settlers with less and less. He was able to observe they were able to fend for themselves rather well. He also noticed these people were not warlike as the others he had met in the past. He chalked up the initial rude awakening he experienced by the two children to their past experiences and cultural myths. The two children met him every now and then. He was polite but careful knowing quite well what humans were capable of doing especially when they were afraid.

As the children grew older and bolder they asked more specific questions. The Dragon answered as best he could to describe in detail aspects of his existence that no one ever knew.

The Dragon had some questions for them too. For example he wondered how they got away with the level of chores he noticed everyone else doing. And why weren't they missed on these long excursions from home? So one day he inquired.

"We're Jews . Some of us in addition to the physical work you have noticed, have a duty to teach. All of us have a trade or business. But as we said we have been chosen to become teachers for our people. Parts of our lessons are to go around and explore our surroundings, discover all there is to discover and uncover. We are trusted and not questioned too much. We have to write stories, relate to our work linking back to the older books and making relevance to our times. We, like all of our people, are given lesson in mathematics, sciences, the arts and other incidentals. To answer directly, we were chosen and we are free to go about as we please."

The older of the two began, "We must tell you that meeting you, AND your very existence, has altered some of our preconceived ideas which leads us to question the basics from which we take root."

The Dragon was amazed. Those are big and wise words for such young children -- or even for many adults. Maybe they are special and have been recognized as such. I can only imagine a world of such minds. He was more and more inclined to show them the old city and the books. As of this time he had not. As he was pondering a correct and safe method for this he asked, "Children, are you still searching for books?"

"Of course. Always. We love them and what they bring to light good bad and otherwise."

"Come sit on me and I will transport you to a place where there are more books than you can ever read in a lifetime. It's not too far as the dragon flies," he said with some humor. "Yes, no, maybe another time? It is up to you."

The older of the two put hands on hips looked up straight into the eyes of the dragon who I have not mentioned was a more content being than ever before he could remember. "YOU are a dragon. And up until now you are the first dragon we have ever met. You are supposed to eat us or enslave us or do something terrible horrible. But you haven't."

The younger child said to the dragon, "We questioned the concept of DRAGON with the elders one time. They told us you are not supposed to exist. You are supposed to be an allegory of some kind for the myth structure of the general society according to them."

The Dragon shook his head in admiration. They seem to understand the words they are saying. They are not just repeating them like clever little birds...

"...That being the case, we said no more to them," the younger child continued. "However here you are! You do exist. Your existence and habits are contrary to our myths. In conclusion, and based upon the contradictions we feel safe. Yes we will go with you." And off they flew.

They flew high and wide. The Dragon wanted them to see their world from his vaunted position as a sky animal as well as their land perspective. They flew to the abandoned city. He circled around it so they could take its size and direction from their home. They landed in an open old park. The streets were dusty dirty and like any abandoned city except things were intact. Oddly there were no broken windows, though there were rats and cats and bats along with a few dogs. Nothing appeared to fear anything else and all the animals seemed to know the dragon. It was almost as if by the very fact that these beings were escorted by the dragon they were safe.

The Dragon led them to the library. They knew what it was immediately and squealed with delight. The

library was the dragon's favorite building. This was his home. He lived here. He read here. He loved HERE. The Dragon had great wisdom, especially for one still young for his breed. Some he had been born with. Other knowledge and wisdom he had acquired in his home, here.

The two gasped as he opened the doors. They were huge. The building was one of the larger ones on a strangely designed city grid. It was flanked by two other great buildings with a road leading straight down to yet other impressive structures with dusty monuments. As they walked the halls and stacks they knew the elders had never seen anything like this in their lives. There were stories about places like this. Everyone thought they were just that, stories.

After many hours of poring through the stacks they had to return home. Not wanting to leave they set up another time to come with the dragon. The Dragon smiled inwardly. He had to fight fear and prejudice to protect and hide his treasure. This was his treasure, the library. And now he had an even greater treasure, someone to share all this with. Flying back with the children the Dragon showed them his aerial skills. He did a loop the loop, a barrel roll and finished up with a cobra stall to a controlled glide in, wings wide and a gentle flare. Plop. The children were laughing all the way.

THE END