The Man Who Loved Dragons

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Fiona Talbot’s frown deepened as she looked around Uncle Leslie’s study.

There were dragons everywhere.

Hunched porcelain dragons served as bookends; a gleaming, snakelike brass dragon was a paperweight holding a stack of bills on the desk. Posters and calendars depicting dragons covered every inch of wall that wasn’t hidden by bookshelves—gold, green, red, and black dragons, flaming and frozen, triumphant and terrifying. One special bookcase, framed in red lacquer, held only books about dragons, ranging from cheap second-hand SF paperbacks to huge, glossy limited-edition art books. A pewter dragon held a sword-shaped letter-opener. Dragon jewelry—pendants, brooches, and rings—hung from silver chains draped across the desk lamp; gold, silver, crystal, and even a ruby eye glittered brightly. A papier-mache dragon’s head leaned against the wall in one corner; a vinyl dragon mask was perched on the back of the desk chair; a green plush pillow in the shape of a dragon sat in one corner of the loveseat, a smooth pink-and-yellow one in the other corner.

Toys, sculptures, knickknacks, dragons of every size and shape stood on every available shelf and surface— fearsome dragons, cute dragons, malevolent dragons, majestic dragons, Welsh and German and Chinese dragons.

And it wasn’t just the study. The soap dish in the lavatory was shaped like a sad-eyed dragon; proud blood-red Welsh dragons adorned every coffee mug in the kitchen.

“Really, Uncle Leslie,” Fiona said, “don’t you think you’re overdoing it just a little?”

Leslie looked up. “Overdoing what, Fi?”

“This dragon nonsense!” She waved an arm at their surroundings. “You have dragons everywhere!”

“I like dragons,” he said mildly.

“I like artichokes, but I don’t have them on my bookshelves!” Fiona retorted.

“It’s hardly the same thing, Fi.” Leslie closed his book. “And in any case, it’s just a harmless eccentricity. Lots of people collect things—coins, or dolls, or comic books. With me it’s dragons.”

“It’s silly, Uncle Leslie! You’re not some college boy any more, you’re a grown man! And you must have spent a fortune on all this junk!”

Leslie shrugged. “It’s my money,” he said.

Fiona sighed. “True enough,” she said. She slumped onto the loveseat, casting the pink dragon pillow a dour glance as she did so. “It’s just that I worry about you, Uncle.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I can’t help it,” Fiona said. “I just don’t understand it—what’s so bloody fascinating about dragons? Bunch of overgrown lizards, that’s all they are.”

“Oh, no,” Leslie protested. “That’s not true at all.”

Fiona glared at him.

“No, really,” Leslie insisted. “If that was all, then why would they have intrigued people so? Why are stories of dragons so widespread? They’re found in so many cultures, Fi—there’s not a major civilization in all the Old World that hasn’t had stories of dragons. In China they’re a symbol of the heavens, of air and water; in Europe they’re associated with Satan and considered a symbol of greed and ruthlessness—but everywhere, dragons are a symbol of power and wisdom. The name ‘Dracula,’ Fi—you’ve heard that?”

“Of course I have...”

“It means ‘son of the dragon,’“ Leslie explained. “And St. George, of course, slew a dragon in Lebanon, in a symbolic defeat of Satan.”

“Monsters.”

“Sometimes. But in China, the dragon is the symbol of imperial power. The dragon brings the spring rains that permit the earth to bloom. And in Wales, the dragon is the great protector. In Rumania, Dracula, son of the dragon, is a great hero, nothing to do with the vampire stories; in Hungary, ’dragon’ was once a title of great honor.”

“It’s all a lot of nonsense, Les. Outdated myths and legends.”

“Maybe,” Leslie conceded. “I’m not sure.”

Fiona blinked. “Not sure of what?” she demanded.

“I’m not sure it’s myths,” he said.

“What, you think there were real dragons? Oh, come on...”

“Well, maybe there were,” Leslie said defensively. “How else do you explain how widespread the stories are, and why they have such power? You won’t find stories about unicorns or other mythical beasts anywhere near as widespread—no unicorns in China, no gorgons among the Norse, but they all had dragons.”

“Les, that’s silly.”

“Why?”

“Dragons are mythical! There were never any dragons.”

“How do you know? People used to say that stones couldn’t fall from the sky, but then they learned about meteors.”

“It’s not the same thing at all! If there were real dragons, we’d have found them by now—or their bones, anyway!”

“Maybe we have,” Leslie suggested. “Maybe dinosaurs are just dragons, after all.”

“That’s silly!”

“Why?”

“It just is. The whole thing is ridiculous. Dragons are mythical.”

Leslie just shrugged.

Fiona dropped the subject, and the rest of her visit was pleasant enough, but the conversation stuck with her and troubled her intermittently thereafter.

Was Uncle Leslie losing his grip? Collecting toy dragons was bad enough, but at least it could be dismissed as a harmless eccentricity. Believing in dragons, though, was something else entirely.

When Fiona next came to visit her Uncle Leslie she brought a friend, Dr. Sylvester Gerard. She did not mention to her uncle that Dr. Gerard was a psychologist.

“I see you like dragons,” Dr. Gerard said, after his first look around Leslie Talbot’s home.

Leslie handed him a cup of coffee—in a dragon mug, of course.

“You could say that,” he agreed, fetching his own cup and settling into an armchair.

“Fascinating creatures. So varied.”

“You’re interested in them?” Leslie asked.

“Oh, slightly, perhaps. What a shame there were never any real ones, eh?”

Leslie sipped coffee, then remarked, “You know, I sometimes wonder if perhaps the myths aren’t based on something real, if that might be why the stories are so widespread.”

“Based on what?” Dr. Gerard asked.

Leslie shrugged. “Oh, something. Perhaps something as simple as stumbling across a dinosaur’s skeleton, or something so complex we can’t comprehend it. Maybe the existence of dragons is somehow conditional.”

Dr. Gerard frowned. “How do you mean that?”

“I mean perhaps dragons are real under some circumstances, and not under others.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, Mr. Talbot. Real is real, unreal is unreal.”

“Can we be so sure of that?” Leslie smiled. “I’m rarely that sure of anything.”

“Well, perhaps I’m not understanding you properly,” Dr. Gerard suggested. “In what sort of circumstances might dragons be real?”

“Perhaps if you believed in them strongly enough... oh, but I am speaking nonsense now.”

Dr. Gerard laughed. “Children believe in Santa Claus all the time, Mr. Talbot, but that never made him real—more’s the pity!”

“Oh, I know, I know.” Leslie made a dismissive gesture. “But I keep thinking that perhaps dragons are real in their own right, somewhere, but that they can only enter our world when there are those who believe in them, or perhaps, who need them—who can open a path for them.”

“It’s an amusing fantasy,” Dr. Gerard said.

Leslie smiled. “Is it? I suppose it is.” He glanced at Fiona. “You’re being quiet today, Fi—what’s new at that office of yours that’s made you so thoughtful?”

Thereafter the conversation dwelt entirely on matters more mundane than dragons, no matter how much Fiona and Dr. Gerard attempted to direct it back.

Afterward, Dr. Gerard told Fiona, “He seems fine. Oh, he’s fascinated by dragons, certainly, but he seems to still have a clear grasp on the distinction between reality and the fantasies he likes to play with.”

Fiona nodded and thanked him, but she wasn’t satisfied.

The next psychologist turned out to be, in Fiona’s own opinion, mad as a hatter; after pronouncing her uncle sane he proceeded to babble about favorable etheric impulses and how Uncle Leslie’s dragons were another form of the universal need to access the spiritual world in a personalized aspect.

The third, however, confirmed her own fears.

“Paranoid schizophrenic,” he said. “He’s developed an elaborate delusional system centered on his belief in these extraterrestrial dragons he idolizes. So far it’s merely a harmless neurosis, he’s still aware of the real world, but as the disease progresses we can expect him to move further away from the norm, to lose touch with external reality and focus more and more upon the delusional world within his own mind.”

Fiona let out a sigh. “Thank you, doctor. What would you recommend?”

Dr. Heldenfels tapped his teeth with his pencil eraser as he considered.

“Schizophrenia responds well to treatment in most cases,” he said. “We cannot provide a complete cure, but we can generally, through careful medication, restore the patient to normal functioning. I would recommend a two-week hospital stay for observation, and then a course of treatment with the anti-hallucinogen Thorazine and a battery of anti-depressants.”

Fiona nodded. “And that will get rid of his obsession with dragons?”

Dr. Heldenfels shrugged. “I cannot say—but it will surely remove his delusion that dragons can be real, and reduce his interest, if it remains at all, to a harmless hobby.”

“How do I arrange the hospital stay?”

“Oh, well, he would have to sign himself in. Either that, or we would need commitment papers, which would require a judge’s signature on a petition from his next of kin.”

“I’m his next of kin—I’m all the family he’s got.”

“Well, if he’s not willing, you would need to demonstrate that his illness represents a danger, to himself or others. I’m afraid that the old days, when a family could send a person for treatment against his will, are gone—too many families used it as a way to dispose of relatives who were perfectly sane, but an embarrassment of one sort or another.”

“I see.”

“Of course, a doctor’s testimony that he does represent a danger carries considerable weight.”

“Of course. Thank you, doctor.”

She knew that Uncle Leslie wouldn’t want to go, but she went through the motions anyway. It took most of an afternoon to work up to asking.

And as she had known he would, he rejected the idea.

At least he didn’t shout; he responded calmly and quietly.

“Why on Earth,” he asked, “would I want to see a psychologist, let alone check into the loony bin?”

“Because you’re not well, Uncle. This obsession with dragons... you’re losing your grip on reality!”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he said mildly.

Dr. Heldenfels helped her with the papers, for a reasonable fee; asserting that Uncle Leslie was, in his deranged state, likely to harm people required a large donation to a trust fund that the doctor assured Fiona was doing wonderful work.

The judge listened sympathetically.

And at last came the day when Dr. Heldenfels and his assistants were to come and pick Uncle Leslie up.

Fiona went to see him off—though of course, she didn’t tell him that that was what she was doing.

He was in unusually fine form that day, and she wished that Dr. Heldenfels could hear the nonsense Uncle Leslie was spouting.

“It’s been a long time since there were any dragons brought to Earth,” he said. “Do you ever wonder, Fi, if there might not be dozens of them out there somewhere, just waiting their chance? Just waiting for someone who believes in them, and who needs them?”

“No, Uncle,” she said, “I’m afraid my imagination isn’t a match for yours.”

“More’s the pity, child—you must lead a drab life.”

Fiona bridled at that, but said nothing.

“What do you suppose would happen, if dragons reappeared?” Leslie asked. “Would people panic? And what would the dragons do, free in a world that’s all but forgotten them? The Europeans saw them as ravening monsters, the Chinese as protectors—which would they be, here and now? I suppose they’d protect whoever had summoned them, and devour his enemies—I’d hope that whoever it was would be kindly disposed toward the rest of us.”

Just then the doorbell rang, and Fiona leapt up. “I’ll get it.”

She let Dr. Heldenfels and the two men, who really did wear white coats, into the foyer. She pointed.

“There he is.”

Rather to her surprise, Uncle Leslie didn’t struggle at all, but came quietly.

One of the men knocked over a ceramic dragon, which shattered on the floor, but other than that it all went without incident—until they were on the front lawn, on the way to the ambulance.

Thunder sounded overhead.

“I always believed,” Fiona heard Leslie mutter, “but I never needed before.” He was staring upward.

Fiona looked up as well, expecting to see only clouds, and then froze, her mouth open, trying to remember what Leslie had said, just moments before.

Devour his enemies, he had said, and Fiona knew that to her Uncle Leslie, she was now an enemy.

And the sky was full of dragons.