Are There No More Dragons? Here is the Story of a Small Boy Who Did Not Believe in the Awful Beasts.

How He Encountered a Whole Menagerie of Curious Creatures and Was Having An Awful Time, When—He Awoke.

MAX WALSH had gained a prize for composition which at first had not particularly pleased him. It was an electric battery that shocked one tremendously when you took hold of the handles, and after he had shaken up every boy who would take hold of it he had grown tired of it. But when the hot summer days came and his father, who was himself an electrician, had shown him how he could make little mill-wheels go round, bells ring, sparks fly and toys move with this small but powerful machine, he spent his days devising new amusements with it.

This day he had completed a "cat scarer." It was arranged along the top of the fence, and was calculated to make the unwary cat who stepped upon it soar into the air with astonished yowls. The family had been watching it work for some hours and had voted Max a great inventor, for at least ten cats had tried it and hastened away, perhaps to tell others about it. At any rate, they had immediate business elsewhere, and, as others soon arrived, it is quite natural to suppose they had put them in possession of the information.

Max was really tired of laughing at their antics, and the Walsh cat seemed as much amused as the rest of the family, although, of course, a cat can't show its delight, as a dog can, by barking and cutting up.

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Holding his battery in his lap and rubbing his eyes now and then to keep the sand from completely closing them, Max was secretly glad that he hadn't swapped the electric machine for a set of quoits, as he had contemplated when he first received it.

It had been a dreadfully hot day, and even now, at 12 o'clock at night, the air was burning. Max had never sat up so late before, but Mr. Walsh, his father, had said that he might as well sit on the porch as thrash about in a hot bed; so, with a feeling of glee mixed with some awe at the gloomy stillness surrounding him, the boy rocked in his chair and strove to fight off the sleepiness that crept over him.

It had been a wonderful day for him, for besides staying up until midnight he had come into possession of a remarkable treasure, the gift of his Uncle Ike, who was always turning up with something rare and strange. This treasure was a number of tiny pear-shaped glass drops, each with a little curled tail. They are very scarce nowadays, and Uncle Ike had found them in an old German's store.

They are called "Prince Rupert's Drops," and the funny thing about them is that you can pound on one with a hammer without breaking it, but if you snap off the tiny tail the drop instantly crumbles into a fine white powder. Isn't that a wonder? Max had crumbled three of these precious things that day, but was resolved to spoil no more, but to save the rest, about fifteen in all, to astonish his boy friends when school opened.

He wondered how they had ever been discovered, and whether Prince Rupert was the one who had found out this marvel, and was about to make inquiry of his father when Mr. Walsh began to speak.

"This is a genuine dragons' night!" said he, with a yawn.

"What is that?" asked Mrs. Walsh.

"Why, in Japan they say that a dragon is stealing all the cool, fresh air when a night like this happens along."

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"Are there any dragons?" asked Max, looking carefully into the gloom.

"People used to say so," replied his father. "Once everybody believed there was a fiery dragon in the very next forest, or, at least, just beyond the mountains, and all the old books are full of tales of knights and heroes battling with them. Sir Jason Walsh, one of my ancestors in Ireland, is said to have killed no less than twelve of the very worst kind."

"I guess that's why there are none left," said Mrs. Walsh. "Don't be filling the lad's head with such nonsense. Sure the mosquitoes are far worse than dragons."

Something in the distance seemed to move dark, even in the black shadows of the trees, and Max, with a bravery that was quite new to him, got up and stole softly toward it; but, as he neared the shape, it moved slowly away.

It seemd to be a gigantic shape, too, bigger than a hippopotamus, yet it glided off like a cloud.

Across the front garden, out of the gate and along the road, shrouded in deepest darkness, he followed it on tiptoe until he found himself in the lane, narrow and crooked, that led to the barn; but here, where every step was perfectly familiar, he began to stumble and become confused, for, instead of a low fence on either side, there were rocky walls overgrown with vines and twisted trees.

Finally he grew a little afraid and turned to go home, but he seemed completely lost as soon as he tried to find his way back. There were houses on each side, tall stone buildings towering to the sky, and over the high walls reached gnarled branches; while here and there he saw, away up aloft, narrow windows faintly lighted. This in his father's lane was a marvel, and he hastened his steps to report it to his parents.

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But now he seemed hopelessly lost. There was nothing that reminded him of home at all! Thus he wandered, until at last the eastern sky grew lighter and dawn came, when he found himself in a place which he had never before seen. He laid his battery down on a mossy bank beneath a crumbling wall and pondered.

Far away a tall building was perched on top of a hill that must have grown in the night! Here and there he saw tiny cottages clustered near the tall building, which he soon saw was a castle such as he had seen pictured in story books. There was no glass in the windows! Yet he saw people moving about within, so it couldn't be a ruined castle. There was no sign of his own home or anything familiar. He had got into another country somehow!

At last he rose, took up his battery and walked slowly along toward the castle, but soon he had lost sight of it because high banks concealed it from view; and thus he was surprised upon coming to another building, roofed with straw, right beside the road. He had never seen a thatched house except in pictures, but here was one right near home! On the wall was a great placard beside a wide door, and upon it was printed this announcement:

THE HARPIES ATTACKED THE ELECTRIFIED ARMOR

NOTICE!
WANTED, A FIRST-CLASS DRAGON TAMER!

Five score pistoles by ye monthe will be paid to ye right party. Must be an expert fireman. Apply within. GERALDUS, Manager.

Max read with astonishment this notice, that showed plainly that there were still dragons in the world. Then he moved along to see what else was visible, and on the side of the house he espied another, larger placard in red and blue letters. It read:

COMING! COMING! COMING!
SEASON OF 1275!

Hank Harrison's Great Show! Cataclysmic Aggregation of Incredible Marvels. The ONLY SEA SERPENT in CAPTIVITY!

GIGANTIC BASILISKS and Cockatrices to be seen only in this SHOW! A live UNICORN!

An OSTRICH, marvel of the ORIENT!!!!

Twelve Numidian DWARFS covered with red hair!!!

A HERD OF UNTAMED COMPOSTELLAS!!!!!

SIX WILD SEA HORSES from LIBYA!!!

A troup of performing HARPIES!! Never before seen in any show!

A shrieking MANDRAKE!

A tame GRIFFIN!!!

AND

THE MARVELOUS PHOENIX!!!!

Admission Twelve Pennies.

Children Half Price.

This, of course, excited Max immensely. He had read of all these things, and with the exception of the ostrich, which he had seen, had been taught that all of these creatures were purely fabulous and had never existed at all. Yet here they were advertised, just as ordinary circus animals are!

While he was reading over the alluring list of names a man, dressed in the most outlandish of clothes, suddenly appeared as if by magic and said:

"Ha! Beshrew me, but prithee thou art applying for the job?"

"What job?" asked the boy.

"Dost not wish to engage with us as a dragon tamer, my brave lad?"

Much to his own surprise, Max promptly answered:

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"Yes, that's what I came for! How many dragons have you here?"

"Six, but one of them is very ill, having lain out in the rain and got so rusty that he really is unable to move. I imagine he won't be with us long. I suppose you know all about dragons?"

"I am Max Walsh. Doubtless the name is familiar to you?" said Max proudly.

"Oh!" exclaimed the man, at once concluding that Max was some famous personage. "Well do I know that name!"

"Yes, I am the celebrated dragon buster and breaker, Walsh. Bring out your animals!"

You see, he didn't believe they had any dragons inside, and merely wished to rebuke the man's pretense. But the man replied:

"Shrive us. Not for all the gold in the great chest will I lead them forth. If you wish you may enter and trifle with them yourself, but I will climb a tree! I am Geraldus, the manager, not the animal trainer."

"In your advertisement I see that you claim to have a herd of Compostellas," said Max. "What are they?"

"Oh, that's only to catch the ignorant! There's no such animal at all!"

"Nor harpies, either, I suppose," suggested the boy.

"No harpies, eh! You just stick your nose into the tent back here and say that! Ha, ha! It would be snapped off so quick that you would never know what did it! No harpies!" By my troth, we have four too many!"

"What does that 'Season of 1275' mean?" asked Max.

"Why, this year! This season, you understand?"

"No, I don't, for this is 1904."

The man looked at him oddly, but merely said:

"You might act as a clown, for that's funny. That's six hundred and twelve years off. I've heard of people forgetting what day it was, but never the year!"

It suddenly came to Max that he had gone back several centuries and was in a time when everybody believed in these fabulous animals. Of course, he couldn't tell how it had happened, but everything proved it. Here were the houses of the past, the clothes and even the animals themselves, and he determined to see them all at once.

"Where can I see the dragons?" he asked.

"Open that door!" replied Geraldus, moving away, "and there you'll see them; but I advise you to beware of the red-headed one in the first stall."

Max gently opened the door and started back in surprise, for there stood a row of dragons who all turned their great scaly heads and breathed out flames of a green hue! Then they reached for him. He slammed the door and stood trembling outside. Geraldus laughed.

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"They most got you, methinks! Better put thy harness upon them quickly, lest peradventure they singe thee. It's up to a hundred and forty degrees in that shed, I'll wager!"

"It is hot," replied Max. "But I have something that'll cool them off."

He then opened the door ever so slightly and shoved the wires of his battery through until they touched the iron scales of the first dragon, who happened to be the rusty one. The electric fluid flashed through them all, and gave them such a shock that their eyes popped out with fear, and they all shot up in the air like balloons.

It cowed them at once, and when he opened the door wide they all crouched before him trembling, and he went in. Patting the sick dragon on the back he soothingly spoke to it, and then went down the line, petting them all, and not one of them dared to flash out a flame larger than a gas jet. Geraldus was highly pleased, and said:

"Hi, by Heck! Hank Harrison, when he gets back from hunting the Dingbat in Mesopotamia, will be delighted!"

"Oh, I've tamed much fiercer dragons than these," said Max, swelling with pride.

"Perhaps you can manage the harpies!" eagerly suggested Geraldus. "I wish you'd try it, anyway!"

"Oh, maybe," replied Max. "I'll see about it."

He thought he had seen pictures of harpies, and had a confused idea what they were like, but he thought they were some kind of a lion or tiger. Then he asked:

"Tell me, what is a basilisk?"

"Oh, that's a sort of lizard with a rooster's head, and they say they're dreadful poisonous, but that's all rot. I've handled them. Some folks say they will sicken you by just looking at you. All bosh!"

"And the shrieking mandrake?" asked Max.

"Same sort of humbug. It's just a root, but we have to keep up the humbug because people all think a mandrake, if pulled up by the roots, will shriek and make a man go crazy. It's wonderful what a lot of fool things the people all believe in. But it's good for the circus business."

"Is the cockatrice also a fraud?" inquired Max.

"Well, to tell the truth, that animal is the same thing as a basilisk. In one country it's called a ptordinkus. They are very scarce and very wild, so that few of them are captured."

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"I suppose you have never seen an Australian Ornithorinchus, or duck-bill?" suggested the boy, "because that country wasn't discovered in your time, but it's as funny as any animal you have here. And there's a lot more, such as the Okapi, and the armadillo, that rolls himself into a ball, and the 'possum, that carries nine little ones strung on his tail."

"I'd like to get one of them!" cried Geraldus. "Where do they come from?"

"From America," replied Max.

"Never heard of that place," said the manager. "I think you are making game of me. But I wish you'd get to work and tame the dragons thoroughly, so that we can move along, for the lord of the castle yonder has informed us that we can no longer remain in his domain. He says the noise of our animals disturbs his slumbers, and the smell is annoying. I suspect he merely wishes a pretext to descend upon us and steal all our stock."

"Why, do you mean to say that a noble baron would do such a thing?" asked the surprised Max.

"Indeed, that's how all these noblemen live. They are all robbers, who fly out like hawks upon every traveler along the roads, and take what they want regardless of right or decency. Only the fact that these knights are regular cowards nowadays, and fear dragons very much, prevented us from being robbed long ago. Once upon a time a knight would travel a great distance to meet and battle with a fiery dragon, but now, dear me, they shudder at the thought of seeing one. Yet they wear armor a half-inch thick, and so heavy that when they fall off their horses they can't move, but have to have someone come and lift them."

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"I should like to see one of those knights," said Max.

"Well, you needn't make a wish, for here comes one down the road now," said the manager; and, sure enough, there came a figure, mounted on a great war-horse, slowly moving toward them, followed by a train of spearmen and archers. When the knight halted beside them, he said, as he lifted a sort of grating, like the front of a cooking-range, from off his face:

"What ho, varlets! Still trespassing on my land! What means this temerity?"

The manager fell on his face, but Max stood looking at the knight with great curiosity, whereupon he said:

"Ha! churl! Bow before me in the dust!"

"Oh, I don't think you are so much," saucily replied the boy. "I'll bet you can't write your own name! Nor add two and four together! I have something in this little box that would make you tumble off your horse as if you were struck by lightning!"

"Ho! a sorcerer! a magician!" shouted the men, while the knight turned pale and trembled. But he said:

"Can you, my young sir, write your name?"

"Of course I can, and write anything else I wish," replied Max, scornfully.

"A scholar! A clerk and so young!" cried the knight. "Why, there is none in all my land can sign his name except Father Albertus. 'Tis a rare and wondrous art! I shall not disturb thee, therefore, but this circus must leave my land. I can't have a lot of dangerous and smelly dragons so near my castle."

"We are having trouble with them ourselves, noble lord," said Geraldus, "but this great magician is a dragon tamer, and he undertakes to handle them so that we can move along on our road."

"But you can't move unless you pay me a hundred scudi rent for the land and buildings that you have been using," said the knight, for he didn't intend to part with the animals, but to take them, and Geraldus to care for them, into his castle. "I demand payment at once!"

"We haven't ten maravedis, let alone scudis!" cried the manager. "Alas! you will ruin me! Oh, why did I come here?"

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"You mustn't ask me any conundrums!" sternly growled the warrior. "You should have thought that all out before you came."

"But will you not take some other form of payment?" asked Max. "I have a great wonder here, and one that will make you famous the world over, which I will give you if you will allow us to move on undisturbed. This is a drop of glass, great sir, but you can not smash it with your great steel axe!"

"Pooh!" snorted the knight. "I could crush it with my fingers."

"Try it," suggested Max, handing him one of his precious Prince Rupert Drops. The knight smote it with his axe again and again, but it resisted every blow as if made of steel, and then Max took it and with a slight twist of his fingers broke off the tiny tail, and lo! it lay a little heap of white powder in the palm of his hand! The knight's eyes stuck out in amazement.

"'Tis magic!" he cried, while all his men whispered among themselves.

Again he smote another little glass drop with the same result, and then Max explained the marvel to him, whereupon he said that for one of these treasures he would release them from the tax.

"Surely such a wonder will bring many travelers to our land!" he cried. "And beshrew me if I don't make them pay for seeing it! Give it to me at once and I will let you go!"

Just then there was a terrible uproar within the thatched house. Awful howls, yells and snarlings split the air. Instantly all the spearmen and archers fled, and the knight's horse reared up so suddenly that he fell with a clanging rattle to the stony ground, where he lay like a pile of old iron, unable to move. Around the corner came running a man, who shouted:

"Fly for your lives! Fly! The unicorn has broken loose and is coming this way!"

Geraldus shinned up a tall tree instantly, but Max slipped in among the still shrinking dragons, for he knew how to control them, but didn't know anything about managing unicorns. Then there appeared, howling with fear, a number of little dwarfs, covered with reddish hair, who ran past like rabbits, followed by the lonely ostrich, who quickly vanished.

"He'll break up the whole circus!" shouted Geraldus to the other man, who climbed up beside him. "Here comes the Griffin, who has shattered his chain!"

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The Griffin was a marvel, indeed; but he, too, flew past so quickly that Max could scarcely see what he looked like, leaving in the boy's mind a sort of mixture of bird, lizard and lion ever afterward. Then he saw several of the sea horses, neighing and snorting, leap over the wall and flee.

All the show seemed to be breaking up, as the manager had feared. The knight on the ground began to bellow for help as his senses returned, but nobody noticed him, and Max had no eyes for anything so tame as a man in armor, for now came another marvel. Round the corner dashed the troupe of Harpies. Max now remembered having seen pictures of these ancient creatures, once so common along the Greek seashore that no tale was ever told without having at least one of them in it, but they surpassed all his ideas.

They are women, thought the boy, as his eyes fell on them, and then he saw that they had the bodies, legs and tails of birds! Only their heads were human, and such heads! "Worse-looking than any teacher I have ever seen!" thought Max.

Although all the other things had appeared to be frightened, these uncanny creatures seemed only angry. When they saw the man in armor on the ground they stopped and all gathered about him, examining him with great curiosity. Finally one cried in a shrill voice:

"It's a man! Let's tear him to pieces!"

The knight shook like a jelly. Max could see that he was an awful coward, and his respect for warriors sank a great deal. The Harpies hauled him about, this way and that, until he yelled for help, but they didn't understand how to get him out of his armor.

"It's no man!" finally declared one of the bird-women. "It's some kind of a shellfish."

"Yes, he's a lobster!" thought Max, as he listened to the knight's wails for help.

"Leave him and seek further!" cried another Harpy. "I smell men, and there must be some about here!"

They all hastened away, and Max ran out. He said to the knight:

"Let me have your armor and I will tackle those creatures! I have a plan!"

"You may have it and welcome, if you'll help me out of it. All I want is to get away home as quickly as possible. Unbuckle me at the back and let me out."

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As soon as he was released the nobleman fled up the road, and then Max set the suit of armor up against a tree and attached his battery wires to it. Then turning on the current, he hid among the dragons again, for he had heard the Harpies returning, maddened at finding no men about.

As soon as they saw the armor they dashed at it with flapping wings and clawed it angrily, but the instant a Harpy touched the iron she fell to the ground and flopped about like a hen with its head off. In less than a minute they were all prostrate, and then Max ran out and tied their legs together.

How they scolded and squawked, threatening him with all sorts of evils, but when he came to look at them closely he saw that, after all, they were able to do very little damage, provided one was careful to avoid their sharp claws. He called the manager and said:

"Here I have your harpies all disposed of. What shall we do with them?"

"The dragons haven't had anything to eat in two weeks," replied Geraldus. "Why not feed these critters to them, now they're all tied and are harmless?"

All the harpies began to weep bitterly at the dreadful prospect, but the manager opened the door and whistled to the dragons. Not one of them moved, however, and then Max said:

"I believe they are all so shocked that they are quite helpless!"

"And I see that their fires have gone out, apparently," said the manager. "How do you account for that?"

"Why, they are dead!" exclaimed the boy. "All are quite cold!"

Geraldus began to cry, shedding such floods of tears that Max was amazed.

"Alas and woe is me! Hank Harrison will discharge me, for I have ruined his show! But it's not my fault, for I never agreed to feed dragons!"

"Never mind," said Max, wiping away a tear. "I will give you my Rupert's Drops, and they will make up for the loss. I've only ten left, but—"

Just then a hand was laid on his arm, and lo! he heard his father's voice, saying:

"Come, it's time to go to bed, my son! You'll sleep in bed if you can do it here!"

It had all been a dream. Max rubbed his eyes and rose with his little battery, and, as he stumbled upstairs, Mr. Walsh heard him say:

"Gee! After all, I never saw the Unicorn!"

WALT McDOUGALL.