

Chapter Nine - The Quarrelsome Dragons

The Green Monkey sank gently into the earth for a little way and then tumbled swiftly through space, landing on a rocky floor with a thump that astonished him. Then he sat up, found that no bones were broken, and gazed around him.

He seemed to be in a big underground cave, which was dimly lighted by dozens of big round discs that looked like moons. They were not moons, however, as Woot discovered when he had examined the place more carefully. They were eyes. The eyes were in the heads of enormous beasts whose bodies trailed far behind them. Each beast was bigger than an elephant, and three times as long, and there were a dozen or more of the creatures scattered here and there about the cavern. On their bodies were big scales, as round as pie-plates, which were beautifully tinted in shades of green, purple and orange. On the ends of their long tails were clusters of jewels. Around the great, moon-like eyes were circles of diamonds which sparkled in the subdued light that glowed from the eyes.

Woot saw that the creatures had wide mouths and rows of terrible teeth and, from tales he had heard of such beings, he knew he had fallen into a cavern inhabited by the great Dragons that had been driven from the surface of the earth and were only allowed to come out once in a hundred years to search for food. Of course he had never seen Dragons before, yet there was no mistaking them, for they were unlike any other living creatures.

Woot sat upon the floor where he had fallen, staring around, and the owners of the big eyes returned his look, silently and motionless. Finally one of the Dragons which was farthest away from him asked, in a deep, grave voice:

"What was that?"

And the greatest Dragon of all, who was just in front of the Green Monkey, answered in a still deeper voice:

"It is some foolish animal from Outside."

"Is it good to eat?" inquired a smaller Dragon beside the great one. "I'm hungry."

"Hungry!" exclaimed all the Dragons, in a reproachful chorus; and then the great one said chidingly: "Tut-tut, my son! You've no reason to be hungry at this time."

"Why not?" asked the little Dragon. "I haven't eaten anything in eleven years."

"Eleven years is nothing," remarked another Dragon, sleepily opening and closing his eyes; "I haven't feasted for eighty-seven years, and I dare not get hungry for a dozen or so years to come. Children who eat between meals should be broken of the habit."

"All I had, eleven years ago, was a rhinoceros, and that's not a full meal at all," grumbled the young one. "And, before that, I had waited sixty-two years to be fed; so it's no wonder I'm hungry."

"How old are you now?" asked Woot, forgetting his own dangerous position in his interest in the conversation.

"Why, I'm--I'm--How old am I, Father?" asked the little Dragon.

"Goodness gracious! what a child to ask questions. Do you want to keep me thinking all the time? Don't you know that thinking is very bad for Dragons?" returned the big one, impatiently.

"How old am I, Father?" persisted the small Dragon.

"About six hundred and thirty, I believe. Ask your mother."

"No; don't!" said an old Dragon in the background; "haven't I enough worries, what with being wakened in the middle of a nap, without being obliged to keep track of my children's ages?"

"You've been fast asleep for over sixty years, Mother," said the child Dragon. "How long a nap do you wish?"

"I should have slept forty years longer. And this strange little green beast should be punished for falling into our cavern and disturbing us."

"I didn't know you were here, and I didn't know I was going to fall in," explained Woot.

"Nevertheless, here you are," said the great Dragon, "and you have carelessly wakened our entire tribe; so it stands to reason you must be punished."

"In what way?" inquired the Green Monkey, trembling a little.

"Give me time and I'll think of a way. You're in no hurry, are you?" asked the great Dragon.

"No, indeed," cried Woot. "Take your time. I'd much rather you'd all go to sleep again, and punish me when you wake up in a hundred years or so."

"Let me eat him!" pleaded the littlest Dragon.

"He is too small," said the father. "To eat this one Green Monkey would only serve to make you hungry for more, and there are no more."

"Quit this chatter and let me get to sleep," protested another Dragon, yawning in a fearful manner, for when he opened his mouth a sheet of flame leaped forth from it and made Woot jump back to get out of its way.

In his jump he bumped against the nose of a Dragon behind him, which opened its mouth to growl and shot another sheet of flame at him. The flame was bright, but not very hot, yet Woot screamed with terror and sprang forward with a great bound. This time he landed on the paw of the great Chief Dragon, who angrily raised his other front paw and struck the Green Monkey a fierce blow. Woot went sailing through the air and fell sprawling upon the rocky floor far beyond the place where the Dragon Tribe was grouped.

All the great beasts were now thoroughly wakened and aroused, and they blamed the monkey for disturbing their quiet. The littlest Dragon darted after Woot and the others turned their unwieldy bodies in his direction and followed, flashing from their eyes and mouths flames which lighted up the entire cavern. Woot almost gave himself up for lost, at that moment, but he scrambled to his feet and dashed away to the farthest end of the cave, the Dragons following more leisurely because they were too clumsy to move fast. Perhaps they thought there was no need of haste, as the monkey could not escape from the cave. But, away up at the end of the place, the cavern floor was heaped with tumbled rocks, so Woot, with an agility born of fear, climbed from rock to rock until he found himself crouched against the cavern roof. There he waited, for he could go no farther, while on over the tumbled rocks slowly crept the Dragons--the littlest one coming first because he was hungry as well as angry.

The beasts had almost reached him when Woot, remembering his lace apron--now sadly torn and soiled--recovered his wits and shouted: "Open!" At the cry a hole appeared in the roof of the cavern, just over his head, and through it the sunlight streamed full upon the Green Monkey.

The Dragons paused, astonished at the magic and blinking at the sunlight, and this gave Woot time to climb through the opening. As soon as he reached the surface of the earth the hole closed again, and the boy monkey realized, with a thrill of joy, that he had seen the last of the dangerous Dragon family.

He sat upon the ground, still panting hard from his exertions, when the bushes before him parted and his former enemy, the Jaguar, appeared.

"Don't run," said the woodland beast, as Woot sprang up; "you are perfectly safe, so far as I am concerned, for since you so mysteriously disappeared I have had my breakfast. I am now on my way home to sleep the rest of the day."

"Oh, indeed!" returned the Green Monkey, in a tone both sorry and startled. "Which of my friends did you manage to eat?"

"None of them," returned the Jaguar, with a sly grin "I had a dish of magic scrambled eggs--on toast--and it wasn't a bad feast, at all. There isn't room in me for even you, and I don't regret it because I judge, from your green color, that you are not ripe, and would make an indifferent meal. We jaguars have to be careful of our digestions. Farewell, Friend Monkey. Follow the path I made through the bushes and you will find your friends."

With this the Jaguar marched on his way and Woot took his advice and followed the trail he had made until he came to the place where the little Brown Bear, and the Tin Owl, and the Canary were conferring together and wondering what had become of their comrade, the Green Monkey.