

A Dragon Tale

It was a cold, cloudy day. The air crisp and clean from the afternoon's freshly fallen snow. Thankfully the large cottony flakes had fallen lightly. Despite being astride his plodding horse, the muffled ring of horseshoe on cobblestone could just barely be heard through the snow. Strange how such a minor detail could be so reassuring.

With a shudder, only partly in due to the cold, last winter came to mind.

He had benefited from benevolence and luck, though he still wondered if either had been meant for him.

Still, it made for a good story and with a few more details and a revision or two... he was sure it would be one of his best. Such was a bard's life.

As a westerly wind fresh from the mountain blasted him, his hood billowed, lifted from his head, and dropped behind him. Despite the clouds, he blinked his way through evening sun reflecting brightly from the snow, to be rewarded with the sight of small town at long last.

The town nestled between three hills with a dozen homes, an old granary, and a single two story building. The homes were of a wooden constructions with thatched roofs and brick chimneys ranging from single room dwellings to one sprawling home with additions that told a long prosperous history. The granary was a unique antique with it's two story blocky building painted garishly in patterns of yellow and brown. The last building, two stories tall, was mostly constructed of brick and stone, with a strong slate roof and four chimneys... It, he hoped, would be the perfect place to seek refuge from the cold.

As he approached the stable doors, a boy with long dark brown hair bundled in several layers of wool clothes came out to greet him "Hi."

"Hello. How much for the stabling?"

The boy looked up. "Depends."

"On?"

"What's your name?"

"Um?"

The boy patiently waited, his silence a challenge... the cold the deciding factor.

"Patrick Stephenson Weaver, recently from Capital City. Most folk call me Pat."

"What's your horse's name?"

"I call him Sprite."

"He bite?"

"Only apples, oats, and hay; in that order. So how much?"

The boy smiled. "Two copper bits a night for the stables, a rubbing, and all the hay he can eat. Another copper bit and I can give Sprite a measure of oats. Either way, you have to remove his saddle and probably ought to take in with you. Tonight's story night and there might be some light fingers about."

"Story night?"

"Yeah, my Pa, he'll tell you all about it. Just go through that door there and ask for Jon." The boy held out his hand.

Digging out the coins, Pat paid the boy.

The coins disappeared and quickly the boy had the stable doors open. As he passed the boy holding the doors open he could smell the muslin oil waterproofing the boy's woolen parka and the scent of burning wood even over that of a dozen animals.

The boy silently closed the doors, barring them from the inside, and then helped him dismount.

"How much for a warm meal and a room?"

"You'll have to talk to my Pa." The boy pointed to the door.

Better than the absence of the wind, Pat could feel the barn's warmth. He unbuckled the saddled and slid it onto his shoulder, then stumbled through the door.

The shadowy smoke filled room had nearly forty people around a half dozen rectangular tables each burning a small oil lamp. Three tall brown haired sisters, with quick smiles, danced among the tables collecting money and serving food.

To his left were double doors leading outside.

Across the room from him, a polished wood bar glistening with spilt beer was covered with the evening's dishes. Behind it a clean shaven young man with a dirty yellowing apron and mouse brown hair smiled and nodded to him, then resumed cleaning and polishing.

To his right a large fire burned in an even larger brick fireplace. A large scythe rested upon the mantle, an inch of it's blade likely stuck into the wood. Between either side of the mantle hung a half dozen short swords just out of reach of all but the tallest children. An old woman in a yellow spring time dress and thick red shawl knitted, her rocking chair just off the mantle.

Pat made his way across the room, to the young man behind the bar.

"Greetings traveler." said the young man as the room went silent with listening ears.

"Hello. How much for a room?"

The man smiled. "Depends."

Pat could feel his face flush with frustration. "On?!?"

"Whether you're able to tell these fine upstanding folk a good story."

"A story?"

"Yup. If it happens you can, I'll give you a room and a meal for free. If it happens you can't; a room and meal will cost five bits, or the stables will cost you two bits."

"I'll take the room." Pat pulled out the coins. Almost magically a girl appeared, slid the money into her apron, and slid away. Another girl spun up to him and set a wooden bowl of hot stew and a couple of squares of warm corn bread in front of him. The young man smiled, set a wooden mug of beer beside the bowl and after a moments hesitation thoughtfully handed him a spoon.

"Oh, it's my turn. Just ask one of girls if you need seconds." Hurriedly he slid his apron off and skipped up to the stage.

"After the King's highway was extended all the way to Blackwall; after the autumn the village of the Faded Rooster tavern and inn was burned down by bandits; and it was right after the harvest of the blue pumpkin, which Pa always described as one of the best; that's when my tale starts. The King had sent a Pair of soldiers to train up our townfolk to a proper militia using our farm implements and those swords," he said gesturing to swords hung on either side of the fireplace.

"Pa and his three brothers had just called an end to their day of clearing new fields. They collected their tools and were headed along the river to follow the King's road back into town to practice drills in the commons... when they heard a scream.

"Aaaahh!

"The four of them took to running but Pa... he was the last to arrive because he was carrying grandpa's old scythe" he said pointing out the scythe above the fireplace, "and the snath kept tripping him up..." the look of confusion on the faces of travelers dragging him to a halt.

"Oh..." he Paused, then pointed to the wooden bit of the scythe over the fireplace, "the snath is the long twisty shaft and the handles of the scythe. Grandpa's scythe is known, as you can see, for having two of the most awkwardly placed handles, being made of northern white oak instead of hickory, and mostly as the worst of all the weapons used by the members of the militia ever. Why, there was the time Pa... Er, um... That's a story for another night, let me get back to the story at hand."

"As Pa came over the last hill overlooking where the King's highway forded the river, he saw the most amazing sight. A creature, of a kind he had never before seen had pinned beneath it a woman of uncommon beauty.

The creature was like a silvery snake but as large as a horse, winged like a bat, and possessing clawed legs like the big cats kept by the king. As they watched silently the beast picked a canvas bag from the broken handcart, carefully lifted the sack over its head, upended the contents into its toothy maw, and tossed the bag onto a pile of empty sacks.

"Pa took a step forward and promptly tripped on grandpa's scythe and rolled down the hill. The beast turned, it's scaled head snaking out from it's body, and half hissed and half growled... it's knife like teeth not an arm's length away.

"Without a moment's thought, my father balled up his fist and punched it square in its nose... well, nostril anyway. It was big after all.

"The beast cowered back from him with a look of horror upon it's... Er, um, in its eyes and with one clawed hand rubbed its nose.

"Pa swore until the day he died, he had heard it say 'Ouch!' when he struck the beast.

“His youngest brother, given courage by its retreat, charged down the hill howling like a mad man, all the while swinging his axe around his head like some barbarian berserker. The other brothers? Why they joined in. Together they ran down the hill hooting and hollering, and waving around whatever they had handy.

"The beast turned to this new sound, its forked tongue licking its lips like a plucked harp string.

"Then as his brothers came halfway to Pa... the great beast sneezed! 'Achoo!'

"It took everyone by surprise... including the beast.

"Then, it sneezed again. 'Achoo!' Great tears leaked from its eyes and it snarled with such ferocity Pa he thought he was about to die. They all must have!

"As Pa scrambled to his feet his brothers stumbled to a halt beside him and set their farm implements for the dragon's charge...

"But the beast turned and jumped into the air instead. With a spread of its wings and a snap like canvas sails catching the wind, it flew away... but not before they heard one... last... sneeze! Achoo!"

"Pa hurried to the woman and checked her for injury. Even with all this, she had little more than a couple of scrapes, a few bruises, and a ruined dress.

"And then after Pa helped her to stand, he asked her name...

Turning his back to the audience and stepping in front of the fireplace, he finishes loudly "And that's the story of how my Pa met my Ma, and this ol' tavern and inn got the name 'The Sneezing Dragon'!

Hurriedly turning, crouching low he says in a hushed voice "But that's not the end of ol' Ouch's story because its whispered that during many a moonlit night, ol' Ouch can be seen flying... looking about... for his... next... meal. BUHAHA!"

"Jonathan George Cooke!" scolded the elderly woman rocking by the fire. "Why you just hold on there! Everyone knows ol' Ouch hasn't done anything to any of ours except that one bad winter he done ate a couple of cows was like to pass anyways! And that winter was so bad, why even the wolves were scarce and I have no doubt as to why! Don't you go scaring these good folk for no good reason!

"Why I'd even go so far as to say Ol' Ouch has, for us villagers... a soft spot!"

Jon, with a smile on his lips and his voice filled with pride, said "And that folks is my Ma! Give her a round of applause!"