Name: _____ Date: _____

Otto and the Rule of Three

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1472 words

Otto cast his first spell in the wizard's tower on a Tuesday, and it went off three times. He had asked for one candle to light, and he received a candle, a second candle, and a third candle, all burning in a row like ducks on a pond. His second spell also went off three times, and so did his third. By the end of the week the tower held three cats, three kettles, three loaves of bread that nobody had ordered, and three exceptionally patient spiders. Madame Vesper, who had trained wizards for forty years, surveyed the whole arrangement and said, "Never mind."

That was the thing about Madame Vesper: she said "never mind" the way other people say "bless you," and she nearly always said it on her way out of a room. On Friday she came down the tower stairs carrying a suitcase in each hand, wearing a hat shaped like a seashell. "Otto," she said, "every spell has three parts: the what, the who and the how-many. Yours always arrive with a how-many of three. Study that. I am going to the seaside for a month." Then she was gone, and the door shut itself once, out of politeness.

She had pinned a note to the back of that door. It said: Feed the cats (all of them). Do not open the east cupboard. And in smaller writing, as though it were an afterthought: Spells cast straight at a dragon happen only once, because dragons are much too old to be told anything three times. Do not cast at dragons. Otto read this twice, which was two more times than he usually read anything, and concluded that the part about dragons was extremely unlikely to matter. He had never seen a dragon, and the nearest one lived, according to the almanac, on the far side of nowhere.

On Saturday morning, forty people from the village of Dunnock Green stood outside the tower in the rain, and the baker, Mr. Okoro, was clutching his hat so hard that it had acquired a new shape. "Our bell has been stolen," he announced. "The great bell, which calls the sheep home and sends the children to school. Last night it hung in its tower. This morning there is a hole in the roof and a footprint in the square the size of a rowing boat." Otto looked behind him for the wizard, then remembered, and a small, cold feeling travelled down his back. "I am the wizard," he said. "Today, at any rate."

His first spell was Find, and he spoke it carefully, with the how-many held firmly in his head. The word went off three times, one breath apart, and three glowing arrows appeared above the square. The first arrow pointed up the hill. The second pointed up the hill as well, just behind the first, and the third pointed up the hill just behind the second, so that together they made one enormous and unmistakable arrow, as thick as a tree. "Well," said Otto, who had never been so definitely right about anything, "that way."

At the top of Cinder Hill there was a cave, and in the cave there was a dragon, and tucked

beneath the dragon's chin like a hot-water bottle was the great bell of Dunnock Green. The dragon was the color of old pennies, and he wore a nightcap that had clearly been knitted for somebody smaller. He opened one orange eye. "Are you the wizard?" he asked. "The apprentice," said Otto, in a voice that came out sideways. "Good," said the dragon. "Apprentices are quieter. My name is Fennick, and I would be grateful if you did not take the bell. I have not slept properly since the year that village was built."

It turned out that Fennick was not a thief at all, only a creature who was worn out. Every night he went out to hunt, and every morning, just as he curled up in the dark to sleep, the bell of Dunnock Green rang six o'clock, and the whole hillside shuddered like a drawer being yanked open. "Four hundred years," he said. "Six bongs a day. I asked politely, a hundred times, with the wind, but nobody understands dragon wind, so I took it instead." He yawned a yawn the size of a doorway. "I am sorry about the roof, and I will pay for the roof, but I will not give back the bell."

Otto tried the one thing that a wizard is supposed to try. He pointed his finger at the dragon and cast Sleep as gently as he could, and the spell went off exactly once. A single small yawn escaped from Fennick, and that was all. "It says so on the back of my door," said Otto, remembering. "Spells at dragons only happen once." "Quite right," said the dragon, a little proudly. "We dislike being told things three times." He tucked his chin back over the bell, and Otto sat down on a rock with his face in his hands, because he now had two enormous problems.

The village needed its bell for the sheep, the school, and the oven, where Mr. Okoro's loaves had to come out at the precise moment the hour was struck. The dragon needed his sleep, and he was, Otto had to admit, entirely right about the noise: a bell that rings six times at dawn is a kindness to a village and a calamity to a hill. Besides, the bell weighed as much as a farm cart. Otto looked at it for a long time, and the longer he looked, the more it began to look like a sum, the way a pile of stones can begin to look like a wall.

"A spell has a what, a who, and a how-many," said Otto aloud, like a man checking his pockets. "My how-many is three. That has always been the trouble. But if the how-many is always three, and I know it, then it is not a trouble at all, and it might even be a tool." He stood up. He had no idea how far it was from the cave to the bell tower, and it did not matter, because he did not need to know, since he needed only to ask for a third. "Carry the bell," said Otto, very clearly, "one third of the way to the tower."

The spell went off three times, one breath apart. The first time, the great bell lifted from under Fennick's chin as lightly as a leaf and floated a third of the way down the hill. The second time it floated another third, and the dragon opened both eyes and said, "Oh, I say." The third time it settled, with a tremendous and well-mannered clang, upon the beams of the tower at Dunnock Green. The village cheered so loudly that a sheep fell over, and Fennick sat in the

mouth of his cave with his nightcap sliding off and made a noise like a very large kettle.

He came down the hill that evening, which alarmed a great many people until they noticed the nightcap. "You have saved your bell," he told the village, "and you have stolen my sleep, and I call that a bad bargain." Otto stepped forward. "What if it rang once a day?" he said. "Only once, at noon, and not at six. By the time you were awake, it would be ringing for lunch." Fennick considered this. "Once," he said. "Exactly once?" And Otto's stomach performed a slow and dreadful somersault, because he had never in his life made anything happen exactly once.

Then he saw it. "A third of a ring," he said softly. "Three times." At noon the next day he stood at the foot of the tower and said, "Ring one third of a ring," and the bell obeyed. Dong, it said, a little, and then a little more, and then a little more, and the three small sounds slid together into a single round golden note that rolled across the fields. Mr. Okoro took his loaves from the oven. Somewhere a sheep came home. High on Cinder Hill a dragon turned over, once, and slept on.

At the end of the month Madame Vesper returned from the seaside, brown as toast, and stood in the middle of her tower among three cats, three kettles and three exceptionally patient spiders. "Hmm," she said, looking at the new roof of the bell tower through the window. Then she looked at Otto. On the table beside him a single candle burned, only the one, quite alone, and a little crooked. "Never mind," said Madame Vesper, and for the first time since he had known her, she said it as if she meant the other thing.

Questions

1. Why did Fennick the dragon take the bell?

A. He wanted gold
B. It woke him every dawn
C. He liked the sound

2. What happened when Otto cast Sleep at the dragon?

A. It worked three times
B. Nothing at all happened
C. It happened only once

3. Why did Otto ask for "one third of the way"?

A. Because three casts add up to the whole way
B. Because the bell was lost
C. Because he could not count

4. What does the story suggest about Otto's three-times spells?

A. They were only a problem

B. They could be useful once he understood them

C. They stopped working

5. Fennick says his voice came "sideways" for Otto. In the story, a voice coming out sideways means it was

A. very loud

B. shaky and strange

C. slow and sleepy

6. What did Otto do with one candle at the end?

A. Lit it so it burned alone

B. Put it out

C. Gave it to Madame Vesper

Words to know

apprentice: learner helper

tremendous: very big

patient: calmly waiting

bargain: deal

obeyed: did as told

Answer key: Otto and the Rule of Three

1. B. It woke him every dawn
2. C. It happened only once
3. A. Because three casts add up to the whole way
4. B. They could be useful once he understood them
5. B. shaky and strange
6. A. Lit it so it burned alone