Name: _____ Date: _____

The Reluctant Dragon

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 2133 words

Long ago, in a cottage on the edge of the Downs, there lived a shepherd with his wife and their little son. The Boy spent most of his days with his nose in a book, borrowed from the gentry and the parsons for miles around. His parents, who were proud of him although they never said so, let him read as much as he pleased. What he liked best was natural history and fairy tales. He read them both together, without ever stopping to ask which was which.

One evening the shepherd came home shaking all over, and announced that he could never again go up on the Downs. For several nights he had heard peculiar noises coming from the old cave up there, heavy sighs and a faraway snoring, which was real snoring and yet somehow not honest snoring. That very evening he had crept up to look. He had seen a creature as big as four cart-horses, covered with shiny scales that were deep blue on top and faded to green underneath, resting his chin on his paws in the cool of the evening.

He had to admit that the beast looked peaceable enough. But he was not used to scales and claws and tails, and he did not hold with them. The Boy closed his book and yawned, and remarked that it was only a dragon. His father demanded to know what he could possibly understand about it. The Boy replied calmly that everybody has a line of his own. His father knew about sheep and weather, and he knew about dragons. He had always said that the cave belonged to one.

Rules always came right if you waited quietly, he said, so would they please leave it all to him. His mother, who was a sensible woman, agreed that dragons were the Boy's line and not theirs. She added that she did not like to think of the poor creature lying up there alone, with no hot supper and nobody to talk to. So the next evening, after tea, the Boy strolled up the chalky track to the top of the Downs. There he found the dragon stretched out on the grass in front of his cave, purring contentedly.

"Well, we live and learn," thought the Boy. "None of my books ever mentioned that dragons purr." The dragon begged him at once not to hit him or throw stones or squirt water. The Boy sat down beside him with a weary sigh, and asked him please to stop saying "don't," because he had only come to see how he was. The dragon was delighted. He confessed that he was perfectly happy, although it was a little dull sometimes. That he was, between ourselves, a confoundedly lazy beggar.

The other dragons had always been so terribly earnest, forever rampaging and chasing knights and gobbling up damsels, while he preferred to have his meals on time, prop his back against a rock, and snooze. So when the earth had sneezed, or shaken itself. The bottom had dropped out of something, he had found himself wedged tight, miles underground, and that

had suited him very well indeed. At last, however, he had worked his way upward and come out through this very cave. He liked the country and the view and the people, as far as he had met them.

The Boy asked him what his mind was always so busy with. The dragon blushed a little and looked away, and asked shyly whether the Boy had ever tried, just for fun, to make up poetry. The Boy said that he had written heaps of it, and that hardly anyone seemed to care for it. The dragon cried that this was exactly his own case. Here at last was somebody with real culture, who could give an honest opinion of a few little sonnets that he had thrown off. But the Boy explained that there was a serious difficulty.

A dragon who settled down among people would be found out sooner or later. Then they would come after him with spears and call him a scourge and a pest. The dragon answered cheerfully that there was not a word of truth in it, since he had not an enemy in the world, being much too lazy to make any. The shepherd and the dragon were properly introduced, and they got on well enough. The Boy's mother never could bring herself to be introduced, because he was a dragon and nobody knew who he was.

But she allowed her son to spend his evenings on the hill, as long as he was home by nine. Many a pleasant night they had there, while the dragon told stories of the old days, when dragons were plentiful and the world was a livelier place. But what the Boy had feared soon came to pass, for a dragon as big as four cart-horses cannot keep entirely out of sight, and in the village inn the people talked of nothing else. They were frightened, and yet a little proud, and they all agreed that this could not go on.

Then one day the Boy walked into the village and found the street hung with carpets and flowers and all the church bells ringing. His friend told him that Saint George was coming, because he had heard of their dragon and meant to slay the dreadful beast. The Boy wriggled to the front of the crowd. Soon a great war-horse came pacing up the street, and on it rode the knight, in armour inlaid with gold, with a plumed helmet hanging at his saddle. His thick fair hair framed a face as gentle as could be, until you caught the sternness in his eyes.

The Boy's heart stood still, and then he ran up the hill as fast as his legs would carry him. He found the dragon polishing his scales with a bit of flannel that the Boy's mother had lent him, until he shone like a great turquoise, and gasped out that Saint George had come at last. The dragon asked him not to be violent, and moaned that he would not see the visitor, and that was flat. He could not fight and he would not fight, he said, for he never had in his life.

He was not going to begin now just to give a boy a holiday. He begged the Boy to run down like a dear fellow and arrange it all, because he was such a manager. He was, in short, the most reluctant dragon that ever lived. The Boy went back to the inn in despair, and found Saint George sitting alone, brooding over the sad tales he had been told all evening. He pleaded that this was a good dragon, who told the loveliest stories and was kind to his mother.

That nobody who knew him could help liking him.

The Saint said gently that he liked a fellow who stuck up for his friends. But that he had heard of nothing but wrongs. "Our villagers are the biggest story-tellers in the country," said the Boy, "and all they want is a fight. Why, they were betting six to four on the dragon." Saint George murmured sadly that perhaps all the wickedness in the world was not bottled up inside the dragons. At last he agreed to walk up the hill and see for himself, remarking that it was irregular but seemed the most sensible thing to do.

The dragon woke with a start and observed nervously that the weather was charming. Then the two of them sat down and discussed the matter like businessmen. The dragon declared that there was nothing to fight about, and that he would not do it. When the Saint asked what he would do if he were made to, he replied that he would simply go down his hole and wait until the Saint had gone away. Saint George looked around at the great bare rolling Downs, and said coaxingly that this was a beautiful place for a fight, with his golden armour against the dragon's big blue coils.

That it would make a picture. The dragon said that the Saint was trying to get at him through his artistic feelings. That it would not work, but he had to admit that it would make a pretty picture. So they arranged everything between them. The Saint would spear him in a spare place, where the skin was thick and folded. It would not hurt at all, and the dragon would put up as good a show as he could. Afterward, the dragon said, the Saint would lead him down to the village in triumph, and there would be speeches.

The Saint would explain that he was converted, and then there would surely be a banquet. That was the custom, the Saint agreed. "That is where I come in," said the dragon. "I am bored to death up here, and nobody appreciates me. I am going into Society." Saint George warned him to do his share of the fighting, by which he meant ramping and breathing fire. The dragon replied that he could ramp quite well, although he was out of practice at the fire, but he would do what he could.

The next morning the whole country-side streamed up to the Downs in its Sunday clothes, with baskets, to find good places for the combat. They chose them carefully, close enough to see everything and ready to run if the dragon should win. The Boy found a place near the cave, and wondered anxiously whether the dragon would turn up. He need not have worried, because the dragon had been awake since early, practising. He was as happy as if the years had run backwards and he were a baby dragon again, playing at saints-and-dragons with his sisters, where the dragon always won.

A roar rose over the Downs, and out of a cloud of smoke pranced the dragon, shining and sea-blue and magnificent, with his tail lashing and fire jetting from his nostrils. Everybody said "Oo-oo-oo!" as if he were a rocket. Saint George lowered his spear and thundered over the grass, and the dragon charged to meet him with a roar and a squeal. The Saint's horse

carried him clean past, and the crowd yelled that he had missed. In the second round the dragon ramped and bounded and snapped at the horse's tail, and the crowd began to cheer him.

The Saint whispered to the Boy, tightening his girths, that the dragon was getting conceited. That he would finish him this round. The end came in a flash, a whirl of coils and spines and flying turf. When the dust cleared the dragon lay pinned to the ground by the neck, with Saint George standing over him. The Boy ran up, anxious, and the dragon lifted one large eyelid, winked solemnly, and collapsed again. A man in the crowd, who had backed the dragon and felt rather sore about it, asked whether the Saint was not going to cut off his head.

"Not today," said Saint George pleasantly. "That can be done at any time. First let us all have some refreshment, and then I will give him a good talking-to." At the magic word "refreshment," the whole crowd formed up in a procession. In the village, Saint George made a speech. He told the people that he had rid them of their dreadful scourge, at great trouble to himself. That they must not go about grumbling and imagining grievances. They should not be so fond of fights, he said, because next time they might have to do the fighting themselves.

The dragon had thought it over and would not do it any more, and if they were good, he might stay. So they must all make friends, and not fancy that they knew everything there was to know. Then he sat down amid repentant cheering. The dragon nudged the Boy and whispered that he could not have done it better himself. Banquets are pleasant things, because they come when something is over. There is nothing to worry about, and tomorrow seems a long way off.

Saint George was happy because there had been a fight and he had not had to kill anybody, for he did not really like killing, although he usually had to. The dragon was happy because he had made friends and found his place in Society. The Boy was happy because, in spite of everything, his two friends were on the best of terms. And the dragon was the life and soul of the evening, although every ten minutes or so he leaned over and asked the Boy whether he would see him home afterward.

Questions

1. What does the Boy know about dragons?

A. He has read about them in books
B. He has fought one before
C. He met one in the village

2. What is the dragon's favourite hobby?

A. Making up poetry
B. Chasing knights
C. Hunting sheep

3. Why does the dragon agree to the fight at last?

A. Saint George forces him
B. He is promised a banquet and a place in Society
C. He wants to win

4. The dragon is "reluctant." What does that mean?

A. Not wanting to do something
B. Very angry
C. Very fast

5. Why did the Boy think the villagers could not be trusted about the dragon?

A. They loved telling tall tales and wanted a fight
B. They had never met a dragon
C. They were afraid of Saint George

6. What does the story say about what a hero should do?

A. He should never fight
B. He can find a peaceful way that keeps everybody safe
C. He should do whatever the crowd wants

Words to know

scourge: a great pest
peaceable: fond of quiet
reluctant: not wanting to
conceited: too proud
banquet: a big feast
ramping: prancing about

Answer key: The Reluctant Dragon

1. A. He has read about them in books
2. A. Making up poetry
3. B. He is promised a banquet and a place in Society
4. A. Not wanting to do something
5. A. They loved telling tall tales and wanted a fight
6. B. He can find a peaceful way that keeps everybody safe