

Sam Dragon

Stephen Corcoran

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Chapter 1

One morning Sam woke up late. There was no one about. He got up and looked around.

No one.

No mum. No dad. No sister.

No breakfast.

He went to the ledge at the mouth of the cave. Then he saw his dad hovering.

“Back you go inside, my son,” said his dad, “I’ll find you some breakfast.”

He rooted about in the cave and came back with something.

“Only this piece of old wolf, I’m afraid,” he said.

“My favourite,” said Sam.

While Sam was eating, Dad told him that Mum was out shopping and that Catherine had eaten her breakfast and had gone to the dragon-school.

Dad said: “And today is your mother’s birthday. I must go into town, while she is out, to look for a birthday present – a maiden, if I can find one. While I’m gone, stay in the cave. Don’t go near the mouth. Remember, you can’t fly yet and the lake is very dangerous. Be good and STAY INSIDE!”

Then Dad went to the mouth of the cave. He spread his wings and floated out and down, away from the cliff and over the lake. Down he went. When it seemed that he must hit the water, he beat his powerful wings until he was skimming the tree-tops and speeding away at a great pace towards the town.

At first Sam did as he was told. He looked around the cave, but there was nothing unusual or fun there. So he went to the front of the cave and threw a few bones into the lake. It was so far down that he couldn’t hear the splash, unless he listened very carefully. Then he went on to the ledge to practise flapping his wings. He worked hard at it. Suddenly his feet lifted off the ground.

“I can fly,” he shouted, “At last, I can fly.”

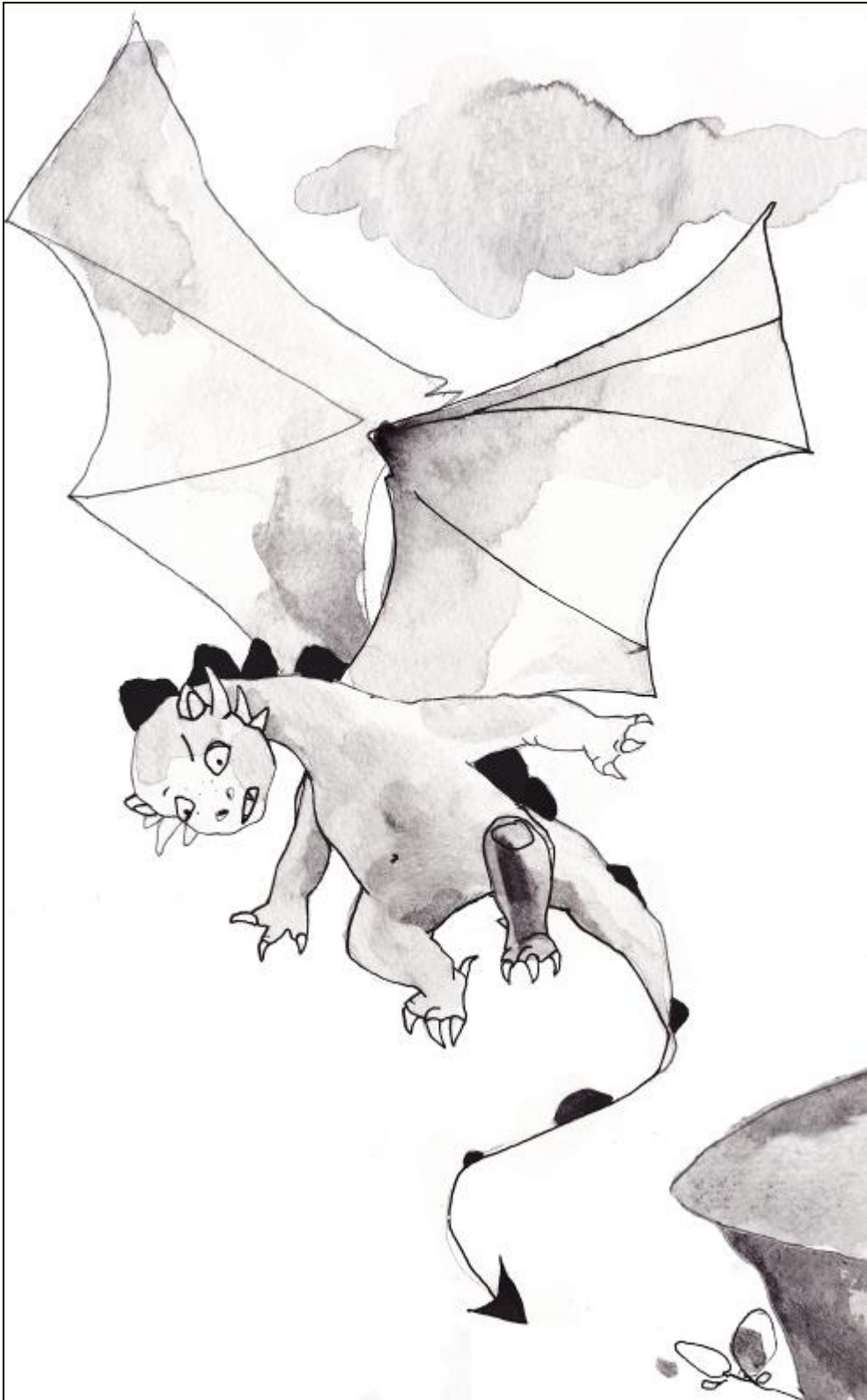
He went to the very edge, flapped harder than ever and flew up and out a few feet. Then he tried to come back, but he had not learnt how to turn. He lost his balance and started to fall. He flapped his hardest, but it was no good.

“Help!” he shouted, “Help me!”

He flapped his wings with all his might, hovered for a moment and then started falling again.

“Help! Help! H- glug!” he shouted.

He fell into the lake, which was deep and cold and beautiful and very dangerous. He shut his mouth and nose very quickly to keep the water out - he knew what water does to dragons - but then he found he could not breathe. He also knew that dragons cannot swim – they are too heavy. Very soon, he would sink.



I can fly! At last, I can ... oh dear!

Luckily for Sam, his uncle Nicholas was coming to visit them. He had been to the town early to get a good plump maiden for Sam's mum's birthday. He was carrying the maiden in his claws, flying high for the cave, when he heard Sam's shout and saw him falling. Quick as lightning he swooped, dropped the maiden and grasped Sam in his strong claws. He was just in time to save the water getting in and putting out Sam's fires.

Nicholas carried Sam up to the cave and put him on the floor. He was just giving him the fire-breath of life when Sam's dad came back. He was also carrying a maiden. He flew straight into the cave, and when he saw what Nicholas was doing, he guessed what had happened.

He dropped the maiden in the cave entrance and rushed over.

"Are his fires out?" he asked, "Is he all right?"

"I think so," said Nicholas.

"Yes, I'm all right," said Sam, "Sorry, Dad. I tried to fly."

"You wretched, disobedient boy," said Dad, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck to give him a good shake, and cuffing him with his tail while he hugged him, "I'm glad you're safe. Thank you, Nicholas. Lucky you were passing."

"I came to bring a maiden for Jennifer's birthday, but it got away," said Nicholas, "I'd better go back to town for another. And look out, Stephen! Yours looks as if it's escaping too."

"Be careful then," said Dad, retrieving the maiden and popping it into the meatsafe, "There was a right turmoil in town. The fire engine was out, there were lots of men in the streets with swords and pitchforks, and I saw hardly any women. I was lucky to find a maiden at all, even a scrawny one. Why not try the city?"

"No time," said Nicholas, "Don't worry, I'll be back. Wish Jennifer a happy birthday for me."

And he was off.

Chapter 2

When Nicholas arrived at the town, he saw at once that Stephen had not been exaggerating. In fact, ‘a right turmoil’ was an understatement. Men scurried to and fro on the streets and battlements. The town gates were closed. There were more fire engines in the streets than Nicholas had ever seen before. Worst of all, they seemed to know he was coming and be ready for him with a plan. He had used his best dragon-craft, flying at tree-top height to the edge of the forest and then hedge-hopping across the fields to the town, but it was as if the people had dragon-sight.

“They must have posted a lookout on the walls,” thought Nicholas, “Soak them! Not a woman in sight, much less a maiden. Ah well, it’ll be a battle, like the old days!”

He soared into the air, climbing high, then turned and dived at the town, coming at them out of the sun. He could see the people below shading their eyes and trying to guess his target. He swooped in a skilful and gracefully-angled parabola, steeply down at first then flattening out and turning slightly. In a blur of wings and talons, he flashed across the town square at top dragon-speed. As he passed, he could see the people dodging and leaping as they tried to work out his plan, some this way and some that - some into his very path. In a heartbeat, he was turning and climbing again, and the people began picking themselves up - then looked aghast at the ruin he had made. In one corner of the square, an old and beautiful thatched house blazed, and the fire seemed to have spread to one of the wooden fire engines. They had scarcely time to grasp their hoses when the next swoop came. This time Nicholas landed at the edge of the town, in a part less heavily guarded. He rolled his body and lashed his tail, bringing down three buildings. He rooted around in the debris, searching under beds and tables. In the third house, he found her - a plump one with that golden hair that dragons love - hiding under a bed. She fought fiercely, and it took all his skill to pull her out undamaged. Then he turned to leave ... and saw his mistake.

It takes time to search three houses, and longer still to extract a determined maiden from her refuge. The brave townspeople, far from fleeing as he had expected, had gathered to attack, and they had brought up three fire engines. As he turned roaring, six hoses opened up on him. Five of them he frizzled, but the sixth, daringly aimed by a large, dark man, caught him in the mouth. There was a hiss of steam, and Nicholas’ knees shook. Quickly, somehow, he scrambled into the air with the maiden dangling from one claw. With the last of his strength, he flew towards the cave.

As he flew, he coughed and spluttered. Somewhere inside was a spark that must be kept alive.

His flight was slow and clumsy. He kept hitting tree-tops. In one, somehow, he lost his maiden. He felt dizzy. His wings were like lead. Behind him he could hear the clatter of the fire engines, distant but approaching, slowed by the undergrowth and trees.



After Nicholas had left, Stephen was uneasy. He had never seen the townsfolk in so truculent a mood. He was worried. The more he thought about it, the more his bones told him that Nicholas was in danger. When Jennifer at last returned, he scarcely paused to say “Happy Birthday, darling” before, with a “must go” he was off, shouting “watch the boy!” over his shoulder.

From afar he saw Nicholas’ retreat, his erratic flight and, as he drew nearer, his crash-landing.

With a roar to shake the mountains, he swooped over Nicholas, breathing fire into the trees beyond and setting a great blaze in the path of the advancing people. Then he turned to Nicholas, landed and breathed a great gout of flame down his brother's throat.

Nicholas stirred, coughed, and a twinkle of fire came from his nose.

"Thanks, brother," he croaked.

"Quick," said Stephen, "We must get out of here! Can you fly?"

"I doubt it ... no," said Nicholas after a few fruitless flaps, "I'll have to walk."

"Walk!!!" said Stephen, "Oh all right. I'll go first and clear a way."

So, painfully, with Stephen clearing a way through the forest, Nicholas dragged along. Gradually the sounds of the townsfolk receded. It seemed they had found the maiden and were satisfied to have driven off a hunting dragon, besides being hampered by the forest fire.

After a mile or so, when it was clear that they were safe from pursuit, Stephen let Nicholas rest and gave him another breath of fire. With some heat inside him, Nicholas said he felt better and thought he could fly. He launched himself into the air and flapped, shakily but safely, off towards his home in the mountains. Stephen followed for a while and then turned for home.

"It'll be a gloomy birthday," he thought.

And it was. The maiden was scrawny and tough and too scared to scream properly. Sam refused to eat any and had to be sent to bed in disgrace. Catherine had not done her homework the evening before. She had got a white mark at school and extra work for the next day. To cap it all, she kept wittering on about some all-girl flop group called Madam and the Anteaters, until she was cuffed and sent to do her homework. Jennifer herself didn't seem to enjoy her birthday treat. She said that she preferred firemen to maidens anyway, and why couldn't someone have got her one of them?

Chapter 3

In the following weeks, partly as a result of Sam's youthful disobedience, maidens became almost unobtainable locally. Very occasionally, in his search for maidens, Stephen went on extended trips - he called them business trips, although no one understood why - to distant towns. He sometimes brought one home, but even when he did, Jennifer and Catherine ate them only reluctantly. Sam refused completely, even when he was punished for it.

Sam soon learned to fly. He took to wandering off, scouting out the edges of the lake and exploring the forest right up to the town fields. He used to walk, in preference to flying, and learned to run at a great pace between the trees, twisting and dodging. Stephen strongly disapproved.

"If dragons were meant to run about like wolves, they'd have had that sort of legs ... and no wings," he was fond of saying, "I didn't get where I am today by skulking under the trees."

But Sam took no notice.

He used to come home at supper time saying he was not hungry. Once Stephen thought he saw a bit of wolf between Sam's teeth.

"Disgusting," he confided to Jennifer, "Wolf is not fit food for real dragons - not unless all else fails."



One day Sam was out running through the forest when he heard an unusual sound. He had found that he kept having to hunt further and further from the lake because his favourite food was becoming quite scarce around where he lived. This time he was in a place where the fields came quite close to the mountains, and the forest was only four or five miles wide. He had been following the sounds of hunting wolves when he heard the strange noise. It reminded him of something he did not like, but he was hungry and the wolf-noise was in the same direction, so he hurried forward – and suddenly came upon a most unusual scene.

Four or five wolves had surrounded a plump maiden – even Sam recognised her as a prime specimen. She had her back to a tree, and she was screaming and waving a stick at the wolves, who snapped closer and closer to her legs.

Sam leapt at the wolves, catching one in his jaws, one with a claw and sending another spinning with a sweep of his tail. The others ran off howling. The maiden took one look at Sam and fell down in a swoon.

Sam had been taught all about swoons at dragon-school. They provided a perfect opportunity to capture a maiden in pristine condition, his teacher had said. He knew, therefore, that he ought to take this maiden home to his family. It was obviously the sort dragons prefer, and maidens were in such short supply, but he just could not face the idea.

While Sam was still trying to decide the right thing to do, the maiden struggled back to consciousness. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, looked at Sam and shrieked.

"Don't eat me. Please, kind dragon, don't eat me," she begged.

"Don't worry," said Sam, "I won't. I hate maidens."

The maiden looked at him for a moment, wide-eyed ... and burst into tears.



The wolves snapped closer and closer.

It was so sudden and so unexpected that Sam had no time to protect himself in any of the ways he had learned at school.

“Maidens are good to eat, but ...” they used to teach the first-formers at dragon-school, “beware a maiden’s tears. They can melt even a dragon’s heart, put out his fires, and leave him defenceless in a hostile world. Do not look at them. Flee or, better still, bite her head off at the first sign of weeping.”

Sam had never quite agreed with the idea that a dragon without fire was defenceless. He found his claws and tail most effective weapons, especially in the forest where flame-throwing had awkward side effects. Besides, he had, from his earliest youth, hardly ever done as he was told. He watched the maiden, and he found the weak feeling in his knees and the coolness in the pit of his stomach rather agreeable. And she was a pretty little thing, he thought. Pity she was not ...

“Don’t cry, little maid,” he said.

The maiden’s sniffling stopped, and she lifted her head.

“Who spoke?” she asked, looking around, “Has some bold knight come to rescue me from this vile and hurtful dragon?”

“’Twas I,” said Sam, adopting what he hoped might be the right turn of phrase for conversation with maidens.

“Where art thou, bold knight? I see thee not,” said the maiden.

“Not surprising,” said Sam, “since bold knights are a scarce commodity when I’m around.”

“Your voice seems to come from the vile dragon,” said the maiden.

“Less of the ‘vile’ if you please, fair maid,” said Sam.

“I must have bumped my head. I’m imagining this,” said the maiden, “Dragons aren’t capable of speech.”

“Well, as we’re trading insults, I’ve never seen a maiden who was a great conversationalist,” said Sam, “Mostly it’s just ‘Help!’ and ‘Aaaaaargh!’”

“It’s a well-known fact that dragons can’t talk,” said the maiden, “They’re just great, ugly bullies who pick on small, defenceless people and eat them.”

She burst into tears again.

“You don’t have to cry again,” said Sam, “You’ve already put my fires out.”

“I’ve what?”

“Put my fires out.”

“How?”

“By crying. Didn’t you know a maiden’s tears did that?”

“No,” said the maiden, “I’ve never heard of that happening.”

She thought about it.

“You’re just being crafty. I’ve heard that dragons are dead crafty. When I’m off my guard, you’ll leap on me and gobble me up.”

“Don’t be daft,” said Sam, “I could do that now if I wanted. But I told you, I hate maidens.”

Somehow this did not sound right in the present company, and Sam noticed the maiden’s lips trembling in a funny way. So he said, in a voice less gruff than his ordinary one:

“What I mean is, the whole concept of maiden consumption is somehow repugnant to me.”

“What does repugnant mean?” asked the maiden.

“Opposed to my general way of thinking,” said Sam, “The practice strikes me as morally deleterious; a dietary deviation not unconnected with the cultural isolation which is its most intellectually significant derivative ... I mean,” he finished, when the maiden’s expression disclosed her complete ignorance of ethical metaphysics, “I do not eat maidens – haven’t for years - and now that my fires are out, I can never show my breath in maiden-eating dragon society again.”

“Oh, poor dragon, now you’re defenceless like me.”

“Not really,” said Sam.

“Oh you are, you are,” she said, “... and quick, hide. I hear a bold knight coming.”

Sure enough, in the distance but growing closer was a curious sound - a sort of diddle-um, diddle-um, diddle-um tum tum – endlessly repeated.

“I don’t give much for his chances,” said Sam.

“Oh, do please hide,” she said, “You might be hurt, and I’d feel responsible. I’ll do anything you say, but do hide.”

To his extreme surprise, Sam heard himself say: “I’ll hide if you promise to meet me here tomorrow.”

“All right. What’s your name?”

“Sam.”

“Mine’s Matilda. Now hide!”

Sam hid in some dense undergrowth – not very well, for dragons are brought up to be better at seeking than hiding – but, as it turned out, this did not matter.

The diddle-umming was now loud and close and revealed itself as proceeding from the saddlebags of a beautifully turned out knight on a white charger. He rode into the clearing, stopped, reached into his saddle-bags and turned off the music.

“I say, what!” he said, “A maiden, surrounded by wolves.”

Some wolves were indeed still lying where Sam had left them.

“Avaunt, foul beasts,” said the knight.

“If you mean ‘go away’,” said the maiden, “why not say so?”

“By gad!” replied the knight, “The maiden yet lives, and she has spirit. To the rescue!”

He attempted to leap from his charger, slipped, caught his foot in the stirrup and fell headlong. He picked himself up, drew his sword, dropped it, picked it up and advanced very cautiously on one of the dead wolves.

“It’s quite dead, you know,” said Matilda, “They all are. You’re in no danger.”

The knight did not acknowledge this remark but advanced with somewhat more confidence, and with elegant strokes of his sword, he ran through each of the wolves in turn.

“You may say ‘my hero’,” said the knight.

“My hero!” said Matilda politely.

“Whence art thou, fair maid?” enquired the knight.

“From yonder village,” replied Matilda.

“Art thou not a princess, then?”

“A humble peasant girl, kind sir.”

“Just my luck,” said the knight, “Pray mount my charger, and I’ll convey you to your cot.”

“Pray do not incommode yourself, kind sir.”

“Incommode myself!” replied the knight, in a quite different and very exasperated tone, “What do you think it’s like, pottering around the countryside all done up like this, rescuing maidens? If that’s not incommoding, I’d like to know what is.”

Matilda was too polite to point out that any rescuing that *had* taken place was certainly not done by the knight. Instead, she climbed on his charger and, without further protest, allowed him to take her home.

Chapter 4

Next day, when Matilda returned to the clearing, she found Sam lying sleeping in the sun. He looked rather fearsome and ugly, and she wondered whether it had been wise to come here all alone. She was about to creep away - she had, after all, kept her promise by coming - when Sam opened an eye and caught her looking at him.

Now they may warn young dragons about the effect of a maiden's tears, but I am afraid that maidens are very seldom warned against looking dragons in the eye. Matilda found that she was caught. She did not particularly mind. Slowly she realised how exceptionally strong, brave, kind and – yes – good-looking Sam was, with his bright yellow eyes, green scales and strong, leathery, green wings.

“Hello,” she said, “I came as we arranged.”

“Yes.”

“What happened to all the wolves?”

“I ate them,” said Sam, “Two for supper and one for breakfast.”

“Yuk!”

“It's better than eating maidens, isn't it?” asked Sam, “Or would you prefer me to eat you? You look very delicious.”

Matilda laughed.

“Did you spend the night here?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Sam, “I can't go home now, with my fires out; nor to school.”

“You can come with me if you like.”

“What would your parents say; and that bold knight?”

“Oh,” said Matilda, “They never notice anything. We could easily hide you from my parents, and the knight didn't stay long. He's after a princess, not a woodcutter's daughter. I can't think he'd give you much trouble anyway.”

Sam smiled, but he didn't say anything.

“And another thing,” said Matilda, “There's a great plague of wolves around our village. Something seems to have been driving them out of the deep parts of the forest. Do you really like eating them?”

“Nothing better,” said Sam.

“Then come and be our guard dragon,” said Matilda, “Everyone will be terribly pleased if the wolves go away, and you will be my hero.”

“I thought that tin can fellow was your hero.”

“I was just being polite,” said Matilda, “You have to be polite if you want a lift home.”

“Be polite to me then, and I'll give you a lift home.”

“My hero!” said Matilda, with such feeling in her voice and admiration in her eyes that Sam's knees felt even weaker than the day before.

“Climb on my back, and hold tight,” said Sam, “I think it might be fun to fly for a change.”

Sam soared into the air, executing a standard dragon take-off. He climbed at first and then, to gain speed, swooped down to tree-top skimming height. He was gratified when he felt Matilda's arms tighten around his neck on the swoop, and he did a few more aerobatics to encourage her to maintain her grip. He took a rather longer route to the edge of the forest than was strictly necessary. They didn't talk a lot – it is not easy talking over your shoulder when flying at tree-top height, or talking at all when you are hanging on for dear life.

Sam landed in a field at the forest edge, just out of sight of a cottage with a pile of logs outside.

“Well!” he said, “Did you enjoy the ride?”

“It's much more exciting than riding on a charger,” said Matilda, “and less bumpy.”

Sam smirked.

“Is that cottage where you live?” he asked.

“Yes, that's our house.”

“Won't they notice me?”

“No, not at this time,” she replied, “They'll be glued to the telly, watching Strictly Come Lancing. They're big fans of knights and chivalry.”

Now Sam found that he couldn't quite grasp what was being said, but he was too proud to say so.

“Come on,” said Matilda, “I'll show you my den.”

“Dragons have lairs, and people have houses,” said Sam, still confused, “Wolves have dens, and maidens don't.”

“All right,” said Matilda, “come and see your new lair.”

She took him round the back of the cottage and into the edge of the forest. There, among some thick bushes, Matilda had made a den for herself, floored with soft leaves. She had entwined twigs and foliage to make the walls thicker, and it looked very cosy. Sam put his head in - and one front foot - and he found it was full. He took his head out and looked at Matilda.

“It's lovely,” he said, “A truly delightful lair, but it has a slight drawback.”

“What's wrong with it then?” said Matilda, her hands on her hips, “Why wouldn't you go right in?”

“I couldn't,” said Sam, “My head filled it up.”

“You mean you're too big.”

“Either that,” said Sam, “or your den's too small.”

He was slightly miffed.

“I'm not a particularly big dragon, you know.”

“You're enormous,” said Matilda, but she suddenly realised that she had made Sam uncomfortable by drawing attention to his excessive size.

“... and enormously lovely,” she finished, rather weakly.

The two stood in an awkward silence for a few moments. Sam was thinking that this would never work and that he had better go back to the forest. Matilda was frantically trying to think of how she could *make* it work. It was Matilda who spoke first.

“It’ll be dark soon. Follow me,” she said, in a tone of voice that allowed for no argument.

She strode off into the forest, and Sam followed. Presently they came to a rocky outcrop. Matilda walked round it and pointed to a dark opening.

“Would that do?” she asked apologetically, “It’s rather bare and rocky and gloomy.”

“Perfect,” said Sam.

He went in head first, sniffed around, backed out and then backed in until only the tip of his nose was showing.

“Not much tail-swinging room, but I’ll enlarge it in the morning,” he said, “A few rock-cracking gouts of flame and it’ll ... oh!”

“Oh my poor Sam,” said Matilda, running up and putting her arms round his snout. She laid her head against his scaly skin, so that her dark hair streamed round his nose, and she gazed with the purest sympathy into his nearer eye.

Sam was glad he was already lying down as the watery feeling in his knees was stronger than ever. It also seemed to be having an effect on his voice. For a moment all he could say was “Mmmmm...”, which sounded so much like the purr of some gigantic cat that Matilda simply lay there. The ripple of Sam’s breathing ran through her entire body, and for a long while, she gave herself over to a feeling of absolute contentment.

Chapter 5

After Matilda had gone, Sam lay unmoving as twilight turned to night, stars came out and the moon rose and sailed up into the sky. A rather rowdy band of wolves came tumbling through the forest, and one banged into Sam's projecting snout. Sam woke up and fixed the wolf with one yellow eye.

"What the ...? Oh, wotcher, dragon," said the wolf, "Coming for some aggro up around the village? You can have the maidens, and we'll have the rest. We'll bite them and tear them and listen to their screams. We'll howl, and we'll terrorise them just for fun."

"Okay, wolfy boy, wouldn't mind some aggro," said Sam, emerging, "Now that you mention it, dinner time approaches."

He squirmed out of his cave, realising it would have to be expanded in case he ever needed to leap out in a hurry, and he fell in with the wolves. They were a large pack – fifteen or twenty, he thought – and it would be better to tackle them in open ground or most would get away.

"Ow arabout vis ven?" said one of the wolves, stopping outside the woodcutter's cottage.

"Yerr, yerr, yerr," said several others, stopping too.

"Too small," said Sam, alarmed, but the pack leader had turned back, and all the wolves were looking for a way in. One by one, they came back and reported.

"Ve doors is all locked."

"Ve windows all 'as shu'ers."

"Can't ge' on ve roof."

"Can't ge' in ve stabulz."

As each made his report, he stood back behind the pack leader and squatted, tongue lolling, looking meaningfully at Sam.

Finally the pack leader turned to him.

"Well, dragon," he said, "how arabout a bi' of a blaze ven?"

Sam realised he would have to fight here and now - and win - or see his Matilda rent by wolves. He had never tackled so many before, but quickly he made his plans.

"Right," he said, "all stand back in this field, so as not to get warmed up. I'll dive on the roof, and they'll run out. Remember the maiden's mine."

"Yerr, yerr, yerr. Gerron wivit," howled the wolves, "Yaroo, Yaroo."

Sam soared into the air. Far off, he saw the knight on his white charger, so he zoomed down and made the poor fellow's horse bolt – straight towards Matilda's cottage.

"Might need reinforcements," he muttered to himself, "and this looks like the best there is."

Then he swooped back around. The wolves were getting impatient in the field, milling about, and some had drifted back towards the cottage. They were howling.

Sam dived for the cottage but swerved at the last moment and, aiming for the pack leader, landed heavily right in the middle of the wolves. He rolled his armoured body, swung

his spiked tail, leapt up and looked around. Five had been caught in his first rush, but the leader had moved and was sitting safely under an oak tree.

“He’s a rozzor or sumffin,” he shouted, “Scrag ‘im lads!”

The remaining wolves leapt at Sam, and the fight was, for a time, a matter of touch and go. Dragon training is chiefly directed at knight fighting, and packs of wolves do not observe the rules of chivalry. Sam was surrounded and snapped at. Several times a wolf managed briefly to fastened its fangs in him. In the end, however, he ignored all but the most dangerous of these assaults and surged forward to confront the pack leader.

“You’re yellow,” said Sam.

In shock at this, the others fell off and formed a ring around the pair.

“Sez ‘oo?” demanded the leader.

“Sez me,” said Sam, “Sitting there, letting everyone else do your fighting for you. You’ve got a yellow streak a mile wide. You’re yellow as custard.”

The leader bristled and bared his teeth. He couldn’t take this in front of his pack. He had to do something.

“Yeller, am I? Well ...”

In mid-sentence, he leapt at Sam’s throat – the signal for all the others simultaneously to renew the attack - but Sam had anticipated the move. He lowered his open jaws as the wolf leader leapt and chomped him in half. Then he swished his tail from flank to flank, disabling two more wolves who had got careless. At this moment he heard a familiar diddle-umming rapidly approaching. The remaining wolves scattered, leaderless. Sam pursued one, which ran towards his den. He drove it into the cave, backed in and thwacked it with his tail. Then he crept back to watch and listen.



The knight must have come to a stop outside Matilda’s cottage because the diddle-umming ceased. There was a crash, which sounded just like an armoured man falling off a horse, then stealthy footsteps as the knight carefully stalked, and ran through, each dead wolf. Finally there was a loud banging at the cottage door.

“Open in the name of errantry,” called the knight.

“No, no. The wolves are attacking,” replied the woodcutter and his wife.

“You are saved. They are dead. I, with my trusty sword, have delivered you,” persisted the knight. The door opened a crack, then slowly wider.

“Enter, kind and noble sir.”

“Thank you, respectful villagers.”

Sam knew that it was wrong to listen in to other people’s conversations, but he really did *not* trust that knight. Small and weak as he was, he might put some sort of spell on Matilda – he might charm her. So Sam crept close up to one of the windows and listened to what was going on inside. He was shocked by what he heard.

“... dozens of the beasts,” the knight was saying, “and even though I was badly outnumbered, I drew courage from my vows of chivalry-“

“-and the fact that they were already dead,” growled Sam, a flicker of anger rising inside him.

Fortunately, there was so much clanking from the knight's armour that nobody heard. He seemed to be re-enacting a great battle, and Sam was only able to catch a few words here and there above the general clatter.

"Teeth gnashing inches from my face ... ran through two ... turned another into wolf pâté ... too many ... surrounded ..."

At this point, the knight must have paused in his exertions because the clanking stopped and his words now easily carried through the window.

"I could have breathed my last on that gruesome battlefield, but I remembered my training - 'defeat the leader', we were taught in knight-school, 'and the pack will scatter'."

"That was my idea," whispered Sam to himself in disbelief, "He's stealing everything. He's just a thief."

Sam was now breathing hard, and the small flicker of anger had turned into a hot flame in his belly, but the worst was yet to come. The knight had started talking to Matilda.

"Well, fair maid, methinks I hath saved thy bacon twicfold."

There was a pause at this point, but then, clearly and distinctly, Sam heard the sound of Matilda's voice.

"My Hero!"

Even though these words were spoken without any real feeling, and even though there was a definite hint of doubt in Matilda's voice, it was too much for Sam. The flame of anger erupted into a bonfire in his belly, and he stuck his head right through the window, splintering the shutters as though they were matchwood.

"You're a LIAR!" roared Sam at the startled knight.

For a long moment, everyone in the little cottage stood frozen to the spot. In the stillness, two tiny smoke rings emerged from Sam's nostrils, drifted across the room and disappeared up the chimney. As soon as they had gone – as if they had been a signal – the room burst into life again.

"Don't hurt him," cried Matilda, jumping in front of Sam.

"Don't hurt me," shrieked the knight, falling to his knees.

"That thing's ruined my lovely plantation shutters!" fumed Matilda's mother, who was very proud of the little cottage and was not easily intimidated.

"Sorry," said Sam.

With his anger cooling, he now realised that he had made rather a mess; not only of the shutters but also of a good part of the wall.

"Gads, it speaks!" said the knight.

"Fetch my axe," said Matilda's father, pointing to a where it hung on the wall.

"Don't touch that axe, Mr Matilda," said Sam.

"How does it know your name?"

Matilda's mother glanced sharply at her daughter.

"Is this a boy dragon? Matilda Scroggins, have you been carrying on with boys behind my back?"

“We’ve only met twice ... well, three times now,” said Sam, “I’d hardly call it carrying on.”

“Avaunt, foul beast,” said the knight, who had now managed to get back to his feet but was shaking so badly that his armour rattled.

“I’ll avaunt you in a minute,” said Sam.

“Why hasn’t anyone brought me my axe?” said Mr Scroggins, “I distinctly remember asking for my axe.”

“Please will everyone just SHUT UP!” shouted Matilda.

She glared around the room, as if daring anyone to defy her, before turning to Sam.

“Sam, did you kill all those wolves?” she asked.

Sam nodded.

“So the wolves were all dead or gone by the time you arrived?” Matilda asked the knight.

“Some of them were still moving ... feebly,” replied the knight, defiantly.

“Like last time – in the woods?” Matilda pressed.

The knight nodded.

“So, by ‘moving feebly’ you mean ‘rapidly cooling’.”

The knight gave another, sullen nod.

“Do you have something to say then?” persisted Matilda.

“I’m sorry I lied about beating the wolves in heroic single combat,” mumbled the knight, staring at his feet.

“Ha! Told you,” crowed Sam, but Matilda whirled angrily round to face him.

“And you! Don’t you have something to say for yourself?”

Sam shrank back from her ferocious gaze, causing a few pieces of splintered wood to fall from the remains of the window frame.

“Sorry about smashing your window ... I mean, wall,” he said, looking at each of the Scrogginses in turn, “I’ll help to fix it. I promise.”

Nobody really knew what to say after that, and it was left to Mrs Scroggins to break the silence. She was not very knowledgeable about etiquette – she had certainly never heard anyone explain how to behave if you had a dragon and a knight as unexpected guests – so she tried to imagine how one of the fine ladies from the town would act. What would the mayor’s wife say?

“Well, now that’s all settled, maybe we should all get better acquainted ...”

She paused to gaze at Sam’s head, which was protruding into the room like the world’s most vulgar hunting trophy. Vaguely she remembered her husband saying something about an axe. But, no. This was her home, and she was the hostess. She would be gracious.

“It’s a lovely night,” she continued, “Why don’t we all go and sit outside?”

Chapter 6

A little while later, they were all sitting round a small campfire in the field next to Matilda's cottage. Sam had cleared away the wolf carcasses. Matilda had built the fire. Mr Scroggins had found some bits of wood to patch up the hole in the cottage wall. Mrs Scroggins had made some tea. And the knight? The knight had pretended that he was seeing to his horse, but it looked to Sam like he was moping. Even now, as he sat clutching his mug of tea, he refused to meet anyone's eye. He just stared sullenly into the fire.

"Well, dear," said Matilda's mum, turning her kindly gaze to Sam, "what's your story?"

Sam opened his mouth to reply, but Matilda answered for him.

"His name's Sam. He saved me from wolves in the forest, but then I put out his fire with my tears, and now he can't go back home. So I said he could live here, with us.

Three pairs of sympathetic eyes examined Sam in the firelight. The knight, who was still sulking, pretended that he was unmoved and continued to stare at the fire.

"And where is ... was home?" asked Mrs Scroggins.

Once again Sam opened his mouth to reply, only to be interrupted.

"Reckon that must be the nest we cleared out yesterday," said Mr Scroggins, "up on the cliff by the big lake."

Suddenly, Sam was sick with worry. His talons clenched, tearing deep furrows in the soil, and his voice shook as he spoke.

"What do you mean 'cleared out'?"

The thought of his dad being chased off – or worse – by a bunch of puny humans seemed incredible to Sam, but still he felt worried.

"It was a rare old battle," said the woodcutter, "That big dragon scorched half the forest, but he couldn't stand up to the new engines."

Sam listened, aghast, as Matilda's father described floating fire engines that could shoot water from the lake all the way up to their cave.

"What happened to them? Were they killed? Captured?" he whispered, almost in tears.

The woodcutter blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected a dragon to have emotions like fear, sadness and love. When he looked at Sam, he saw nothing more than a dangerous beast, but Mrs Scroggins knew a scared little boy when she saw one. She shot her husband an angry glance and turned to Sam, radiating motherly tenderness.

"Don't fret yourself, son," she said, "The dragons flew off to the West, towards Wales. They might have been driven out, but they were not hurt."

"They were lucky I wasn't around," said the knight, "I'd have given them what for."

Having drunk down his tea, the knight seemed to have recovered his spirits. He was now striding up and down in the firelight, flourishing his sword in mock battle. Just for fun, Sam gave a low growl, and he was pleased to see the knight jump about a foot into the air. When he landed, he was quivering so much that his armour rattled.

"You're really not very good at being a knight, are you?" observed Matilda.

“I excel in all aspects of the chivalric arts,” returned the knight angrily, “except the ones that involve actual fighting.”

Sam was about to give his own opinion on this, but before he could speak, the knight sat down with a clatter and continued in a sad, quiet voice.

“Mummy always said that I should go into the priesthood, but Daddy wouldn’t let me. ‘Roderick, my boy,’ he said, ‘take my sword, my horse and my armour. Go out and make a name for yourself.’”

“Roderick?” said Sam, thinking that this was a pretty poor name to have made.

“Sir Roderick to you,” spat back the knight.

“Well, what a pair you two make,” said Mrs Scroggins, looking them both over, “So much alike and so much different. Two halves of a puzzle that won’t be put together.”

Her mother’s words had an electrifying effect on Matilda. Without warning, she jumped to her feet, sloshing tea everywhere - but at least retaining the presence of mind not to cry ‘Eureka!’, because that would have been a cliché. Sam could see a gleam in her eye that he wasn’t sure he liked. His feelings of unease were more than confirmed as Matilda explained her plan, but he could also see that there was no escaping from it. Matilda was quite determined, and there was no way she was going to be denied.

Chapter 7

Two days later and Sam was fed up with skulking through undergrowth. He had an unusual desire to spread his wings and soar into the sky, but this was probably only because Matilda had said that he mustn't. In fact, he was under strict instructions to stay completely hidden. He had to be a stealth dragon.

For Matilda and Sir Roderick, the journey had been easier. There *had* been a tense moment, after the first couple of hours, when Matilda had told the knight to stop all the 'tiddle-umming' or she would weld his visor shut, but after that, they found that they got on pretty well. Matilda had cut her hair short, put on some trousers and was riding a borrowed donkey. She looked every inch the part of a squire accompanying a brave knight on his quest. Except anyone who might have listened in on their conversation would soon have realised that it was the squire who was in charge.

"You do know what you're to do, don't you?" she would ask Roderick at least once an hour, "Repeat your lines for me ... better still, let's run through the whole thing."

In short, everyone was glad when the morning of the third day dawned – the day that would bring them to their destination.



Matilda had picked a town that was not too near and not too far. It was important that no one should recognise her, but she also wanted to carry through her plan as soon as possible. So it was that, in the early afternoon of that third day, a knight and his squire rode into the town square at Roebridge and began their show.

Sir Roderick went first, and when he reached the centre of the square, he drew his sword and caused his charger to rear up. The few eyes that had not already been fixed on the two strangers now turned in their direction. An expectant hush fell over the small crowd, and Matilda took her cue.

"Good people of Roebridge," she bellowed out, "may I present to you Sir Roderick, Wolfsbane."

Sir Roderick circled his horse so that everyone could get a good look at him, all the while twirling his sword and executing some impressive flourishes. If Matilda hadn't known better, even she would have believed that she was in the presence of a seasoned fighter. Keeping her eyes on the crowd, however, she continued in her loudest voice.

"Flower of chivalry, scourge of his foes, protector of the meek, Sir Roderick has heard tales of your plight and has come to secure the borders of this proud town against the vermin of the forest. He is here to vanquish the terrors of the night, and his arrival heralds a new era of plenty for all you worthy citizens."

Just as Matilda had hoped, there was a chorus of cheers, but her attention was fixed on a more important event. Three portly men had emerged from one of the large buildings that bordered the square. The central, and most well-rounded, of the men wore an ornate gold chain around his neck, and he looked a little nervous. Matilda dismounted at once and went to take the reins of the charger, but Roderick had become quite absorbed in his role as saviour of the common folk, and he was too busy showing off his sword-twirling skills to have noticed the new arrivals.



♪ *Tiddle-um tiddle-um tiddle-um tum tum* ♪
To the tune of the Lone Ranger
(or, if you're posh, the William Tell Overture).

“Sir Roderick ... Sir Roderick!” hissed Matilda, finally getting his attention, “The Mayor!”

Fortunately, they had practised this show so often over the last couple of days that, thus prompted, the knight immediately remembered his part. Dismounting nimbly from his charger, he advanced, sword drawn, upon the trio of portly men. Involuntarily they shrank back from the knight, which was exactly what Matilda had intended. Then, at the last moment, Roderick plunged his sword, point down, into the beaten earth of the town square and bent his head in a gesture of submission to the master of the town.

“Sir Roderick, Wolfsbane, at your service,” he announced.

The look of relief on the Mayor’s face – and the slight trembling of his knees – gave Matilda her next cue.

“My master and I thank you for the warm welcome we have received from the people of Roebridge and for the honour of being greeted by your worship in person,” she said loudly, for the people to hear, but then she dropped her voice almost to a whisper as she continued, “but maybe it would be best if we retired to a more private location to discuss business.”

The mayor had not gained his position by being slow on the uptake.

“You are most welcome to our humble town, Sir Roderick,” he boomed out, “It is we who are honoured by a visit from so gallant a knight, but you must be tired from your journey. Please do step inside and receive refreshment.”

Chapter 8

Meanwhile, Sam was still skulking in the woods. He knew full well that Matilda would be arranging a handsome payment for clearing the area around Roebridge of wolves. She would be careful not to say exactly how the clearance would be achieved, and naturally everyone would assume that the ludicrous Sir Roderick would complete the job, but the real work – as always - would be done by Sam. In fact he was meant to be starting his part of the plan right now. He was meant to be scouting the forest to find out how many packs there were; how many wolves.

All he could think about, however, was that he seemed to have got the thin end of the partnership. Roderick got to ride along the road, in the sunshine and with Matilda for company. He had to creep through the damp, dark woods on his own. Roderick did all the showing off. The common folk thought *he* was the hero, while Sam's bravery would never be known by anyone. It wasn't fair, and the longer that Sam thought about it not being fair, the more he delayed his search of the woods. By the time he made a start, it was already evening. There was just enough daylight left to make a quick circuit of the town, taking careful note of any and all signs of wolf.

In fact, as sunset began, Sam had not *quite* finished the job. He had to rush to get to his position, a hiding place from which he was able to watch the preparations being made for the closing of the town gate. The first to emerge was Matilda. With some difficulty, she wheeled a large barrow of logs into the middle of a nearby field and started laying a fire. By the time it was kindled and the last red light of the sun was fading from the sky, a fanfare rang out and a figure in shining armour came galloping through the gate. Sam sniggered as he heard the thin and tuneless music drift through the air. A suitably shabby send off for a shabby knight like Sir Roderick.

"People of Roebridge! I carry your banner with honour."

The words came drifting to Sam on the breeze. He stopped his chuckling and looked up to see Roderick galloping backwards and forwards in front of the town walls. The knight held his lance aloft, and from it streamed the banner of the town. This wasn't scripted, thought Sam with annoyance, but he also had to admit that it was a good show.

"I go now to do my night's work ..." Roderick paused to allow some good-natured groans at this terrible pun, "... and the knowledge that I serve such good and noble folk will make light my sword arm. Vicious and bold though the vermin may be, I will cut them down like wheat. So great will be the carnage that you, your children and your livestock will be safe for a generation."

A loud cheer rose from the walls. It seemed that the whole population of the little town had turned out. Sam made a mental note that Roebridge probably didn't have much in the way of culture or entertainment, and he watched as Roderick galloped off to where Matilda stood by her fire. The knight stopped there, to exchange a few words with his 'squire', before continuing on into the woods. Warily, Sam rose from his hiding place and padded stealthily through the trees to make the agreed rendezvous.

"He is not a snivelling little weaselly coward, he is my team mate," Sam repeated the words under his breath.

Matilda had, over the last couple of days, reacted quite forcefully whenever Sam had said out loud what he thought about Roderick. She had stressed the need for cooperation and

team work, and the importance of putting the common good before personal feelings. It had left an impression on Sam, but probably not the one that Matilda had intended.

“He is not a lying toerag in a tin can,” Sam said, continuing in high-pitched impression of a girlish voice, “he is my trusted work colleague.”

He only stopped his grumbling when his sensitive ears picked up the sounds of rattling and clanking amidst the trees ahead. Moving with great skill and stealth, he crept forward until he had a good view of the brave knight. Sir Roderick had come into the woods, as he had been instructed, but he clearly did not like it. He had his sword drawn and his visor down. His armour rattled as he stood, knees shaking, staring into the darkness. Every now and again he would spin round to face a different direction, but if there was some sound that triggered these movements, it was too quiet for even Sam to detect.

Time for some fun. The wicked thought was in Sam’s head before he was even aware of thinking it, and he crept forward through the darkness. It was easy to get close. The rattling sound covered all noise, and human eyes don’t work well at night – worse when they are peering through the slit of a visor. In no time at all, Sam was right behind Sir Roderick. His talons itched and his mouth watered at the thought of what he was to do next. He drew back slightly, opened his jaws wide and ...

“Boo!” he shouted.

The effect was impressive. The knight’s terror was so enormous that it caused a temporary breakdown in the laws of physics. Everything seemed to happen at once. Simultaneously, Sir Roderick jumped in the air, called for his mummy, fell to the ground, flourished his sword, clutched at his heart and spun round to face Sam. When it was all over, however, Sam found that the knight was still standing - although very very still - with his sword held limply in his hand.

Sam waved a paw in front of the visor.

There was no reaction.

Sam tapped gently on the helmet with a claw.

“Hello,” he called softly, “Anyone home?”

Nothing. Not even any trembling. Sam was not sure that he had ever seen Roderick this still before. He began to worry that he had given the knight a heart attack. The plan would need some changes if he were dead. Matilda would be quite angry. Sam began to fear for his safety. He reached out and, with the tip of his claw, slowly pushed up the helmet’s visor.

Roderick’s eyes were open, which had to be a good thing, but there was a funny look on his face. He was angry – that much was clear – but there was something else as well. A firmness of the jaw, a colour in the cheeks, a ...

... WHACK!

Suddenly and without warning, Roderick brought round his sword and, with the flat of it, delivered a resounding blow to Sam’s shoulder. Caught off guard, Sam jumped back, but not nearly quickly enough to escape the enraged knight, who now delivered blow after blow – each one punctuated with a word.

“Never” WHACK “Ever” WHACK “Do” Whack “That” whack “Again.”

The blows were running out of power towards the end when Sam finally managed to catch the sword. He pinned it easily between two of his claws and brought his face close up to Roderick’s. The strange look had gone now, and the rattling sound had returned. Sam

savoured the moment, making sure that Roderick had a few moments to contemplate his bared teeth and allowing a low growl to rise up from his belly, before drawing back slowly.

“Point taken,” he snarled, releasing his grip on the sword, “Now, shall we go and scrag some wolves?”

Roderick nodded his agreement, sheathed his sword and allowed Sam to lead the way through the woods. The knight seemed strangely quiet now, even the rattling of the armour had stopped, but Sam couldn't help but think back to that strange look. He wondered if his trusted work colleague might be turning a bit doolaley. The thought of creeping about the woods, at night, with a lunatic in tow suddenly started to sound like a weak point in the plan. Fortunately, it wasn't long before they approached the first wolf pack.

Chapter 9

Sam smelt them long before they came within sight. He left Roderick to creep slowly forward while he circled round to come at them from the opposite direction. Even though he had much further to go, he still reached his position first and had some time to observe the wolves, who had gathered in a small clearing.

“Look what I’ve caught,” said one.

Sam saw that he carried a squirrel in his jaws. A squirrel that was still struggling.

“Let’s play ‘squirrel’,” called another, “Come on everyone, we’re going to play a game.”

Sam could see only five wolves. They each came slinking forward to take positions in front of various trees. It must have been the pack leader who had suggested the game because no one disagreed, and wolves are notoriously argumentative. Sam made a mental note to go for him first.

Then the game began. The squirrel was tossed into the centre of the clearing. It sat there for a few moments, quivering and looking anxiously round the circle of wolves, before making a tentative dash towards one of the surrounding trees. Its path was blocked by one of the pack members, and the terrified creature was forced to return to the centre of the circle. If it thought that it was safe, however, it was wrong. Taking advantage of the distraction, one of the other wolves was creeping forward. The squirrel saw him just in time and whisked its tail out of the way. It tried to dive past the attacker and reach the safety of the wood, but the wolf retreated quickly, making escape impossible.

This then was the cruel sport with which the wolves filled their time when they were not terrorising the townspeople, and Sam knew that it could end up only one way for the squirrel. It wasn’t the plan, but he tensed his muscles, preparing to leap into the clearing. After all, he couldn’t sit back and let this barbarism go unpunished.

“T’wit ... t’wit.”

The low cry of an owl came drifting across the clearing. It made no impression on the wolves, focused as they were on their game, but to Sam it signalled that the trap was ready to be sprung. Scanning the undergrowth on the other side of the clearing, he soon spotted Roderick crouched behind a large bush. He quickly recalled to mind the moves that they had practised, adapting them to account for the number of wolves. It only took moments, but it looked like time was running out for the squirrel. It had not noticed one of the wolves creeping closer behind it, getting ready to spring.

“T’woo ... t’woo,” went Sam.

At the agreed signal, Roderick burst forth from his hiding place, brandishing both sword and shield. The clanking of his armour was enough to catch the attention of the wolves immediately, but just in case, Roderick put on a little show.

“Avaunt, foul beasts,” he roared, beating his sword against his shield, “or prepare to taste my steel.”

The wolves stared at him, but they did not run.

“Well, will ya look at that,” said the leader, “I was just thinkin’ of us goin’ to get some dinna, an’ ‘ere it comes right to us.”

“You must be sidekick, boss,” cackled one of the pack.

“What?” growled the leader, turning on his unfortunate underling, “What did you call me?”

“You know, sidekick,” stuttered the wolf, “Like having superior and unexplained powers of the mind.”

“Thaz right,” replied the leader, “I’m known for my superior mind.”

“Do we eat ‘im now?” cut in another pack member.

Now, Roderick could not understand the wolf-tongue, so he did not know what the wolves were saying to each other – it never crossed his mind that they were talking at all – but he could see that they were spreading out; surrounding him. This was certainly not part of the plan, and he did not like it one bit. His mouth went dry, his knees started to wobble, and the sword shook in his hand. In a vain effort at self-defence, he pointed his sword at the nearest wolf, but it took no notice. They were getting awfully close, he thought, wasn’t this where Sam was meant to come in?

Sam, however, had been enjoying the show a little bit too much. It was only when he heard the question ‘do we eat him now?’ that he realised he had left things too late. The leader was opening his mouth to order the attack, and Roderick had been retreating away from Sam’s hiding place. There was too much distance to cover. Unless the knight could put up some kind of defence – which seemed unlikely – he would be torn to pieces before Sam could properly get into the fight. Nevertheless, Sam tensed his powerful dragon muscles and prepared to spring forward. Maybe his appearance alone would be enough to distract the wolves. The pack leader started to give the command.

“Get h-,” POCK!

A large, spiky horse chestnut landed on the leader’s nose.

“-ouch!” he cried, and everyone looked up.

There, on a branch above, sat the little squirrel. It was momentarily frozen by becoming the sudden centre of so much attention. Then it seemed to recover itself.

“Losers!” it squeaked down at the wolves, before scampering away across the branches.

The delay wasn’t long, but it was long enough for Sam to have advanced on the wolves. Before they even had a chance to return their attention to Roderick, he was amongst them. The leader went first, and as the others were clustered so tightly around the knight, Sam decided to take a risk with a move they had practised only a couple of times before.

“Jump!” he shouted, before swishing his tail round in a vicious blur of scales and spikes.

Roderick made an impressive amount of height, given the weight of armour he was carrying. The wolves, still stunned and confused by the sudden appearance of an angry dragon, were not so nimble. Smash, crash, bash, went Sam’s tail, and the remaining vermin were thrown around the forest like so many pine cones. In an instant the clearing was silent, and Sam gazed around in satisfaction at his handiwork.

“That was very ... effective,” said Sir Roderick, who was gaping at the carnage, “but I can’t help feeling that you left it a little late.”

“It was dramatic,” said Sam, “Isn’t a certain amount of drama necessary in the doing of heroic deeds?”

Roderick raised his visor and directed a hard stare at Sam.



Harsh language, but fully justified under the circumstances.

“If it hadn’t have been for that squirrel, those wolves would have had me for dinner,” he said.

“Mmmm,” mused Sam, “Knight saved by squirrel. That’s probably not the best headline for the start of your new career.”

“I’m just saying that there are things we could improve upon,” the knight snapped back.

“Absolutely. We should talk about that,” said Sam, heading off into the woods, “Let’s have a meeting about it. Maybe next week. Are you free next week?”

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Sir Roderick, ignoring the sarcasm.

“There’s still four more packs, and the knight’s not getting any younger,” replied Sam, cheekily.

“But we have to collect the ears,” said Roderick, exasperated.

Sam was confused.

“Why, are we having a cocktail party?”

“Pardon?”

“The ears,” Sam explained, “You roast them over a fire. They make delicious crunchy nibbles. My mum always serves them at parties, with cheese and wine.”

Roderick was dumbfounded. He also felt a little bit queasy, but he fought down his bile and explained the deal that Matilda had struck with the mayor.

“One pair of ears proves that we’ve killed one wolf. For each wolf we kill, the mayor will give us one silver ducat.”

“Excellent,” replied Sam, “That means I get the rest of the wolf. How about a ten minute snack break?”

Chapter 10

The clearing of the woods and forest surrounding Roebridge continued in more or less the same pattern for the next few hours. Roderick did not come quite so close to death as he had that first time, and maybe his style improved a *little* as he got more practice, but the fundamental approach remained the same. They would creep up on the wolves, Roderick would jump out and shout ‘Avaunt, foul beasts’, the foul beasts would attack, and Sam would stage a surprise counter-attack. It was all rather simple ... and rather deadly.

Twice now they had returned to Matilda, who was sitting, calmly reading one of her books in the orange glow of the fire she tended, to drop off armfuls of wolf ears. The second time, Sam noticed that the first lot of ears had been strung together on a piece of thread. Matilda, he thought, must have brought her sewing kit with her. He wondered if she did embroidery as well but shuddered at the thought of which animal parts she might use for that.

“Are you absolutely sure that this is the last pack?” asked Roderick, for about the fifth time.

Sam rolled his eyes, remembering the boring afternoon he had had skulking and moping in the woods while Roderick was enjoying himself in the town. True, he had spent most of the time sitting around and telling himself how unfair everything was, but he *had* got up and done some scouting in the end. By the time it got dark, he was sure he had been *almost* all the way around the town, and his nose was very good at sniffing out wolves. It seemed pretty unlikely that he would have missed anything just because he wasn’t really concentrating and had rushed the job.

“Absolutely. One hundred percent. You can bet your sword on it. This is the last pack,” he told the knight.

They were silent for a few moments, picking their way through the undergrowth until Sam noticed a subtle change in the air.

“Sshhh! Stop. I can smell them up ahead.”

“Okay,” whispered Roderick in return, “Same plan as ...”

But when he turned back to look, the only thing he saw was the tip of Sam’s tail disappearing between the trees. It seemed to move with a life of its own, slithering like a snake in the moonlight and with no more noise than if it had been attached to a mouse, rather than a dragon. Sighing heavily, and inwardly cursing the rash boldness of his new companion, the knight crept forward.

Moving quietly in armour is a difficult skill to master, but Roderick had not been boasting when he said that he excelled at all the chivalric arts ... except actual fighting. So, once again, he managed to approach the wolf pack without them realising he was there. What he witnessed was a group of about ten wolves – the biggest pack yet – lying around messily between the trees and yelping at one another. Eager to be away to the comfortable bed that the mayor had promised him, Roderick ignored the yipping and yapping of the animals and quickly gave the signal.

“T’wit ... t’wit!”

Sam, however, although he was not very far away, had a completely different view of the situation. He actually understood what the wolves were saying to each other, and what they were saying was this ...

“Can’ wait t’ go raidin’. Gerrus a birra chicken or even a bite or two of hooman.”

“Can we go now? I’m bored.”

“We can’t go without the boss. Ee’ll bring those fleabags from the west woods. Then we’ll have enough for some rare old aggro – at least twenny, maybe more.”

They all laughed their cruel laughs at the thought of the fun that lay ahead: “Hur, hur, hur!”

The west woods! Oh no, Sam thought, that was the bit that I didn’t quite get to. So there *was* another pack, and it was coming here right now, and there had to be at least – Sam counted on his talons – ten of them. To try and fight that many here, with trees growing thickly all around, would be madness. His mind racing, Sam tried to remember the signal that they had agreed for ‘abort the mission’ ... but there wasn’t one. Oh dear! Sam was just about to try making something up – the mating call of the caped Bolivian tree frog, perhaps – when things went from bad to worse. An owl hooted. A real owl. A real, male owl.

“T’woo ... t’woo!”

Out jumped Roderick with all the energy and enthusiasm of a man who knows that this is his last job of the day and the quicker it’s done, the quicker he’ll be tucked up under some nice, clean sheets. Consequently, his performance was the best yet ... only with one significant drawback. Given the pause between his ‘t’wit’ and the corresponding ‘t’woo’, Roderick had had time to sink into a delicious daydream about giving up chivalry and becoming a pirate. As a result, his character was slightly skewed.

“Avast there, foul beasts,” he began, “The choice be yours, face the wrath of me cutlass or walk the plank. Either way, tha’ll be sleeping in Davy Jones’ locker tonight ... aaaarrrgh!”

Getting completely caught up in his pirate persona, Roderick even forgot his timidity, and he accompanied this last ‘aaarrrgh’ with a sword thrust at the nearest wolf. The thrust connected but, alas, only in the manner of stage fighting; it failed even to penetrate the skin.

“Ouch!” said the wolf, “You wanna be a bit more careful with that. It’s pointy. Could have someone’s eye out.”

He might have said more, but at that point, Sam broke cover and everything started to get a bit complicated.

“Abort!” yelled Sam, “There’s another pack. We’ll be hopelessly outnumbered.”

The wolves turned to examine the new arrival.

“Well, wadda ya know,” said one, “Mr Pointy-Stick has brought a pet dragon along. I don’t think I’ve ever tasted dragon before.”

Chapter 11

Now the problem was that Sam had been so intent upon shouting his warning to Roderick that he had completely forgotten about making any sort of surprise attack. The wolves, therefore, had time to assess the situation and to plan. It is never a good idea to give a wolf time to think, and so it proved in this case. The pack was already spreading out, surrounding Sam. Their tactics were clear, but the largest wolf confirmed them.

“Leave the hooman for now. We’ll scrag the dragon first and come back for him later.”

Even as Sam was tensing for his own attack, the wolves were on him. If he had had his fire, or even if they had been on open ground, it would have been no contest, but here in the dense forest it was a different matter. Wherever Sam turned, the wolves in front would keep just out of his reach, while the others would attack his flanks. He tried swishing his tail to catch them out, but it was blocked by stout tree trunks. One of the wolves got too close, and Sam caught it with a slash of his talon. The beast went yelping off into the woods, but there were still too many.

Sam looked at Roderick, shouting at him to run - to save himself - but the knight seemed to be frozen in place. His visor was up, and Sam could see that strange look stealing across his face - the flush of colour in the cheeks; the determination of the gaze; the jaw that now seemed to be carved from granite. Even though he was fighting for his life, Sam paused for a second in disbelief as the pieces clicked into place. The cowardly knight suddenly looked noble.

Roderick himself was completely unaware of this transformation. From the point where Sam had blundered out of the undergrowth, shouting about another pack, there had been only one thought in his mind – he knew for sure that he was going to die. Very quickly, however, other thoughts had crowded into his head. First and foremost was the anger at Sam’s carelessness. How many times had he asked about other packs? It was a lot. Oh yes, that dragon was going to get a piece of his mind once they got to the afterlife. Did dragons have an afterlife, he wondered, would it be the same one? He’d probably find out soon enough because Sam didn’t seem to be doing so well against those wolves. In fact, there was one sneaking up behind him right now. One he hadn’t seen. That one was probably going to end the fight for Sam. He should do something. Call out or ... something.

Without any real conscious decision, Roderick found himself leaping forward. His sword swung round, seemingly with a will of its own, and the flat of it caught the sneaking wolf a resounding crack on the rump.

“OOowww!” it shrieked, jumping high into the air and executing a swift about-turn, “Wachit lads, Mr Pointy-Stick has woken up.”

And now the battle turned. Roderick laid about the wolves with the flat of his sword, while Sam slashed with his talons. If they had been given even one more minute, the outcome would have been certain, but fate was not kind to them. Almost as soon as they had started winning, a blood-chilling howl rang out and an enormous wolf bounded into the centre of the action.

“Iz the boss. The boss!” cried all the wolves, regrouping around the newcomer, “Have ye brought them from the western woods?”

“Yer, I ‘av,” growled the boss, and Sam was suddenly aware of a dozen more pairs of eyes gleaming out from the pools of darkness between the trees, “At ‘em lads!”

The wolves' tactics were simple. The newcomers from the western woods kept Sam at bay, while the boss and his pack surrounded Roderick. Once again, the disadvantage of fighting amongst trees started to tell. A dragon likes to have room to swing its tail and slash with its talons, so Sam felt as trapped as if he were in a cage. Several times he made to push forward and help Roderick, who was being hard pressed by the wolves, but each time he exposed his flanks and was forced back. Frustration at the situation started to turn to anger as he realised that this was all his fault. If only he had been more careful in his search of the woods. If only he had played his part in the plan. The shame and guilt made his cheeks burn, but it was nothing to the fury that came next.

Roderick was steadily losing ground against the onslaught of the boss and his gang. Whatever power had caused him to leap to Sam's defence was now fading. The sword moved more slowly in his hand, and his shield drooped. One wolf darted in to chomp at the knight's leg, its fangs clanking on the hard metal of his armour. Roderick caught it a blow on the head with his shield, and it jumped back, but not before the boss had seized his moment. Bounding in from the side, he grabbed Roderick's sword in his jaws and tore the weapon from its owner's hand. Sam now saw that his friend was helpless. The wolves saw it too, and they closed in for the kill.

"Watch out, boss," said the one who had bitten Roderick's leg, "he's got tough skin."

"Don't worry," growled the boss, stalking slowly forwards, "I've skinned his sort before. He's just canned meat."

This was just too much for Sam. His fury and guilt seemed to mix, deep down in his belly, and he felt something ignite; something that could not be contained.

"That's not canned meat," he roared, "*That* is my trusted work colleague."

Everyone looked at Sam, but only Roderick guessed at what was coming next. Willing his tired limbs to one last effort, he jumped high into the air; and not a moment too soon. With an audible click, Sam's jaws snapped open, his neck extended, and a gout of flame shot from his mouth. It flowed like a river through the centre of the wolf pack, engulfing the leader and many of the others. Those who escaped the full force were still scorched. Some even caught fire, running panicked through the trees. By the time the knight's feet touched the ground again, the fight was all but over. Sam was causing mayhem amongst the remaining wolves, and any that could were running for their lives. For form's sake, Roderick ran through a few of the scorched wolves – a mercy really – and then they silently collected the ears. It wasn't until they were walking back to meet Matilda that Roderick spoke.

"Thank you for saving my life back there, but ..." he paused, seeming to concentrate on pushing his way through the undergrowth, "a little warning would have been nice."

Sam nodded thoughtfully, and he too seemed to put all his concentration into their progress through the dark wood. At least until he found the right words.

"Thank you for saving *my* life," he said, "but maybe next time, when something is trying to kill us, you could use the sharp bits of your sword. Might be more effective."

Roderick contemplated this idea for a while.

"Yes," he said eventually, "Yes, I suppose we could find *some* room for improvement. Maybe we should have a meeting about it?"

"Next week?" offered Sam.

"Yes," said Roderick, suddenly sounding very tired, "I think I'm free next week."

Chapter 12

When they got back to the town, Sam stayed hidden in the woods while Roderick went to report to Matilda. Watching from his hiding place, Sam was surprised to see the knight very subdued. There was no swishing of his sword, no jumping around, no swaggering of any sort. Then he pointed to the fire, which was now burning quite low, and said something that had an electrifying effect on Matilda. She jumped to her feet and ran across the fields, straight to where Sam was hiding.

“Hello, how are-” began Sam, but he stopped dead when Matilda threw her arms around his neck and gave him a huge hug. His knees went very weak indeed, and he gave out that low, purring sound, which he always thought sounded quite wrong for a rough, tough dragon like himself. It made him sound like a three-tonne kitten.

“You got your fire back,” said Matilda when she finally released her grip, “That’s wonderful.”

“Yes,” said Sam, not quite sure what else he could say.

“I didn’t realise that that could happen,” continued Matilda.

“No,” replied Sam, aware that he was not really holding up his end of the conversation.

Then Matilda stepped back, and her gaze dropped to the ground between them. In the early light of dawn, Sam could see her foot tracing a figure of eight in the dry earth between the tree roots. He wondered why she had suddenly gone so quiet when she usually seemed to have so much to say. Had he done something wrong?

“I suppose this means you can go back to your family?” whispered Matilda.

Sam didn’t understand. Yes, he supposed that he would like to see his family again, but not when he was in the middle of such a marvellous adventure. Besides, how could he leave Matilda with only that scrawny knight to protect her?

“I want to stay with you,” said Sam, “and Roderick,” he added, a little too quickly, “Let’s follow your plan. Let’s follow it all the way through; right to the end. The fire doesn’t change anything.”

Matilda looked up, a smile on her face and a glistening look in her eyes.

“Don’t you dare cry, Matilda Scroggins,” said Sam, suddenly and firmly, “I’ve only just got these flames back. I don’t want them extinguished again by maiden tears.”

“I’d better go then,” said Matilda, shyly turning away, “Besides, I’ve got some money to collect.”

And she skipped lightly back across the fields to where Roderick was busy threading wolf ears onto a long piece of string.



Roderick’s entry into the town, which took place shortly after the gates had been opened, was a somewhat muted affair. There were only a few people up and about at that hour of the morning, and the knight was too tired to make any real show. Matilda, however, was pleased to see the few people that they did pass gazing in wonder at the garlands of wolf ears hung around Roderick’s neck, but it was still not on the same level as their grand entrance of yesterday. The bleakest point was reached when they arrived at the town hall. Everything was

shuttered, and it took no end of banging and shouting to rouse any of the inhabitants. Eventually, a junior servant did appear at the door, and she led them into a waiting room.

It was a long while before they were admitted to see the mayor. Time enough for them to wash, breakfast and catch up on their sleep. Matilda had been careful, however, to ensure that Roderick's armour still bore the signs of battle: teeth marks on the breastplate; blood spatters on the visor; wolf hair matted into the joints of his armoured boots. The outfit was completed by three long strings of wolf ears that hung over Roderick's shoulder and round his body like a sash. His appearance, therefore, was enough to make the mayor forget his breakfast – which he was still enjoying as they entered – and to pay full attention to his guests.

“I do apologise, my lord, for disturbing your breakfast,” began Matilda, in a brisk and friendly fashion, “Hopefully we can conclude our business quickly so that you can return your attention to the excellent bacon and eggs.”

Roderick, who had become distracted by a painting that hung near the fireplace, turned sharply at this. He had been given nothing but bread, cheese and water for his meal.

“One silver ducat per wolf was the agreed price,” he said, eyeing the mayor's plate hungrily, “I have fifty pairs of ears, so I think that makes fifty silver ducats.”

Now the mayor, as we have said, had not become mayor for nothing. Since his first meeting with Sir Roderick, he had been thinking hard about how to save himself some silver. He calmly put down his knife and fork and put his own plan into action.

“So many? From just the woods around this small town? I think it unlikely,” he said, “More likely, I think, is that you had wolf ears already hidden beyond the walls. You rested all night and this morning come back to play the hero. I'll not have you steal from the poor folk of this town. I'll keep my silver.”

Well, Sir Roderick went so purple in the face, his hands clenched in such spasms, his armour rattled with such fury that even Matilda couldn't be sure that his anger wasn't genuine.

“You ... sir ... scoundrel ... honour,” the noble knight spluttered in incoherent rage.

Matilda was at his side in an instant, guiding him to a door. A door which, conveniently, led directly to a balcony overlooking the town square.

“Master, please take some air,” said Matilda.

She thrust Roderick out onto the balcony and turned back to the mayor, who was looking very pleased with himself all of a sudden.

“It's a very expensive business being a knight errant,” she calmly explained to the horrid little toad of a man, “There's horseshoes, fodder, vets bills, dents to be hammered out of armour, swords to be fixed ... well, any number of expenses.”

The mayor made a little gesture with his hand as if to say, ‘what concern of mine is this’, but Matilda continued. She had to raise her voice a little because there was an excited babble rising from outside in the square.

“Sadly, without the silver that you owe him, Sir Roderick will have to give up his life on the road, hang up his spurs and settle down.”

Behind Matilda's back, the mayor could see Roderick strutting up and down on the balcony, and there were now cheers ringing out from what sounded like a large crowd below.

“The real tragedy is,” Matilda continued, “that being a knight is pretty poor training for doing anything useful once you’ve stopped questing. The only option would be to go into politics - to run for mayor.”

A chant had now started outside. ‘Roderick’, the people were calling, ‘Rod – er – ick. Rod – er – ick’. The mayor went quite pale and produced, as if from nowhere, a pouch of silver ducats.

“Maybe you should go and congratulate the hero of the hour,” said Matilda, taking the pouch and ushering the mayor towards the open doorway, “We will have to be going very soon, and you don’t want to miss the portrait opportunity.”

Epilogue

Happily ever after is a phrase that is very much overused, and it seldom provides a truly satisfying end to a story. So let me tell you a little of what happened to Sam, Matilda and Roderick.

Sir Roderick, Wolfsbane, developed quite a reputation for chivalry. Travelling from town to town, his trusty squire always at his side, he systematically rid the countryside of wolves and other vermin. The people loved him, and he grew very rich on the silver he earned as the bounty on wolf ears. Nobody ever suspected that he had any help. To tell the truth, as time went on, he needed Sam less and less – maybe because the wolves tended to get in a bit of a panic when they heard he was around, but maybe because he had become just a little bit braver. Eventually, Roderick grew brave enough to face his greatest fear. He returned home to see his father, who was grudgingly satisfied by the name his son had made for himself. Having survived this encounter, Roderick decided to settle down. He married the daughter of a wealthy merchant and really did run for mayor – not of a town, but of a large city. Unfortunately, he became rather pompous and was forever telling his many children that they should ‘see the world’ and ‘make a name for themselves’.

Matilda Scroggins reappeared in her home town some years after that fateful night of the wolf attack on her family’s cottage. She had, of course, written to her parents regularly, but no one else had heard any news. It was with some surprise, therefore, with which they noted the appearance of the old woodcutter's daughter – now all grown up, mysteriously rich and with an unaccountable expertise in sword-fighting. Matilda drifted around the town for a while, getting into everyone’s business and asking all kinds of foolish questions about local commerce, before seeming to disappear once more. Some months later she popped up again, this time running a market stall that sold all kinds of glassware – a commodity that had previously only been available in the city. Somehow, Matilda had been able to build a cottage and workshop off in the woods. Those who visited said that it was built cleverly against a rock face where some old caves once were, and the most mysterious thing was that the glass workshop did not seem to have a furnace.

Sam Dragon ate an awful lot of wolves. As the population started to thin out and it became difficult to earn a living from wolf ears, the three friends decided that it was time to go their separate ways. Sam went searching for his family and found them living in a nice new cave up in the mountains. They had given up eating maidens and had become self-sufficient – living off the land, Sam’s dad called it. There was some grumbling about ‘lack of tradition’ and ‘dangerous new ideas’ when Sam told the stories of his adventures, but generally, it was good humoured. Eventually, Sam tore himself away and, with many promises to visit often, he headed back to help Matilda build her workshop. The old caves were easy to enlarge, using his fiery breath to crack the stone, and he was able to create a very comfortable lair for himself. One entrance came out into Matilda’s workshop, where he would help with the glass-blowing, and several back doors were cunningly hidden in the surrounding woods, so that Sam could pop out for a wolf or two when the urge took him.

Sam and Matilda lived happily ever after.



Matilda and Sam doing some glass-blowing ... dragon style.

About the Author

Stephen Corcoran was born in 1936 in Murree, which is now in Pakistan, where his father had been posted as an army doctor. The family returned to England when Stephen was a toddler and settled in the seaside town of Littlehampton. Here Stephen gained a great love and knowledge of the sea. Throughout his life, he was always happy to be messing about in water – with or without boats.

On leaving school, this being soon after the Second World War, Stephen was called to do national service. At the age of 19, he was in charge of a platoon of three tanks in the Royal Tank Regiment. Afterwards, he went up to Trinity, Oxford, where he read Greats (a combination of Ancient Greek, Latin, Ancient History, Philosophy and Logic). This was where he met the love of his life, Jennifer. They were married in 1962 and spent 55 happy years together.

During his working life, Stephen had two office jobs – the Home Office and the Foreign Office. In the Home Office, as an Inspector of Factories, he ensured that safe conditions were maintained in factories and other workplaces. Many people, without knowing it, were saved from injury, or worse, by his twenty-five years of diligent effort. His time in the Foreign Office was a short spell at the British embassy in Athens - his key qualification being that he had studied Ancient Greek at university. As Labour Attaché, Stephen studied the system of Worker Participation in nearby countries, where factories belonged to the workforce and profits funded services like schools and hospitals for the workers and their families.

When he retired, Stephen moved to Bronington in Wales, where he enjoyed the simple activities of a country life. He collected wood for the fire, kept an extensive vegetable garden, laid his own hedges and helped his neighbours with herding their cows. He also kept up lifelong interests in boats, cards and wine, being an active member of the local sailing, bridge and wine clubs. He died, aged 80, in 2017.

Sam Dragon was a story told, in various forms and at various times, to Stephen's three children. A man of impressive imagination and wit, Stephen could produce stories 'on demand' and in great variety. Sadly, this story is the only one that was written down. The manuscript, partly typed and partly hand-written, was found among his personal effects.