

## PLANTAGENET AND THE PRIMORDIAL PONDWEED

By Joan Lennon

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There once was a very junior wizard named Short, and his familiar, who happened to be a frog. Short was called Short because he wasn't very tall, and his familiar was called Plantagenet because that was his name.

They lived in a large and prosperous town on the banks of the River Purpose. The town was large enough to have a fine School of Wizardry, which was eagerly attended, and prosperous enough to have a fine Museum of Antiquities, which nobody visited. Yet in spite of this, the town was not the sort to have stories told about it, because it was rather dull. It was even called Dull—Dull-on-Purpose.

Junior Wizard Short would probably not have chosen a frog as a familiar, for wizards often carry their familiars about on their shoulders, and frogs have large, cold feet. But, as you may have noticed, smaller people tend to find themselves at the end of queues. Short was the last person to see the Familiar Mistress on the first day of term, and Plantagenet was all that was left.

“Cheer up, Short!” said the frog brightly. “You start wearing thicker sweaters, and we'll soon set some cauldrons bubbling!”

Short shivered and agreed.

The frog and the boy worked hard at their studies. Then, just as they were completing Beginning at the Beginning Magic, Part II, something came to Dull that was worth telling a story about.

The Something came sailing down the River Purpose on an otherwise empty and rather singed barge. The Something was extremely large and scaly and a sort of greeny gray, and when the townspeople asked what it was, it belched fire at them and said,

“I'se a Bad-Tempered Dragon, I is, and I'se come to stay, and you'se as don't like it is going to look round one day and find yourselves all overdone and crispy round the edges. So there.”

And the Bad-Tempered Dragon stomped up the quay and headed for the best hotel in town.

At first people thought, How exciting! but very soon they were thinking, How unpleasant! for the Bad-Tempered Dragon was appallingly badly behaved.

Dull had a shiny new supermarket. The Bad-Tempered Dragon ate everything it had, including the recyclable packaging. He went joyriding on all the supermarket trolleys and bent their frames so that not only would they not go straight, they wouldn't go at all.

Dull's best hotel was turned into a shambles. The Bad-Tempered Dragon made them bring all the duvets and all the pillows from all the bedrooms into the Grand Ballroom, which was the only place big enough from him to sleep in. And when Dull's Golden Trotters Club very politely reminded him that Wednesday at 9:00 sharp they planned to be learning the samba (morning coffee and one biscuit included after the class), he made rude noises at them.

Dull had a beautiful municipal fountain in its fine town square. And if I told you what the Bad-Tempered Dragon did in that, you'd probably never dabble your fingers in a municipal fountain again.

All the junior wizards of Dull's Wizardry school were given "Ridding a Large and Prosperous Town of Bad-Tempered Dragons" as an end-of-term project.

Short and Plantagenet threw themselves eagerly into the assignment. They tried Vanishing Spells and Shrinking Spells, Transforming Spells and Horrible Smells Spells. But nothing worked. The Bad-Tempered Dragon was still there, making life in Dull a misery.

Then, one day, Plantagenet called Short over to a cauldron in one of the labs. It was lunchtime, and Short was keen to join the other junior wizards in the canteen before all the snake-eye stew was gone. But Plantagenet would not be budged.

"Look deep, deep into the cauldron, Short," he said, "and tell me what you see."

Short looked into the sludge at the bottom of the cauldron. He saw sludge. Then it cleared a little, and he realized he was looking at pondweed. Pondweed and some bubbles.

"Oh, Plantagenet," he groaned. "Not more home movies! Not 'This is me as a tadpole,' 'This is me just before I lost my tail,' 'This is—' "

"Look deeper, Short!" interrupted Plantagenet. "This is not ordinary pondweed! It isn't even the very special pondweed of my home pond. You are looking at Primordial Pondweed!"

"Excuse me?" said Short, but Plantagenet's already bulgy eyes were beginning to pop out of his head.

“Can you hear that?” he shrilled. “Can you? Get a cup! Get a jar! Get anything! Hurry!”

Short didn’t argue. He dashed wildly about the lab until he found an empty marmalade jar on one of the shelves, and raced back to the cauldron with it.

He could hear something now. *Boom! Boom!* The surface of the sludge trembled as if to the beat of huge approaching footsteps. *Boom! Boom!* And then suddenly—

“Catch it, catch it!” shrieked Plantagenet as a spray of sludge and pondweed shot up into the air.

Shorty stuck out the empty jar and caught the stuff just as it was about to land back in the cauldron.

Suddenly everything was quiet.

“What was that?” whispered Short.

“*Brachiosaurus*, I expect,” Plantagenet whispered back. “Muddy big feet, they had. Let’s go.”

And without more explanation, the frog had jumped onto Short’s shoulder and was urging him out of the lab and into the street.

“But where are we going?” panted Short.

“Museum of Antiquities,” was the answer, “and DON’T DROP THAT JAR!”

Inside the Museum it was still and dim. Plantagenet peered at the floor plan and then hustled Short down a corridor to the Main Hall.

“The Bad-Tempered Dragon!” gasped Short, but it was only a huge skeleton. A huge dinosaur skeleton.

“Quick!” said Plantagenet. “Dump the pondweed into her mouth!”

Short was beyond arguing. He had to climb on a table to reach the dinosaur’s skull, but he was just tall enough to dribble the primordial sludge into it. Then he fell off the table in a heap, for the skeleton moved.

“That was delicious,” it said. “Got any more?”

Short just stared, but Plantagenet hopped onto the table and said, “Sorry, that’s it.”

“Too bad,” said the skeleton regretfully. “Now, how can I help?”

Outside in the sunlight, the Bad-Tempered Dragon had discovered Dull’s children’s playground. He had already kicked all the sand out of the sandpit, bent the climbing frames, and snapped the seesaw, and was just about to use

the chains from the swings to floss his teeth, when he heard an unexpected sound.

*Boom! Boom!*

The Bad-Tempered Dragon turned a paler greeny gray. The ground was trembling.

*Boom! Boom!*

Suddenly it stopped. The Bad-Tempered Dragon fearfully turned his head. His jaw dropped, then he shrieked and covered his face with his claws.

“Well!” said a disgusted voice. “To think that egg of egg of egg of mine should behave like this!”

The Bad-Tempered Dragon looked about him at the wreckage and belched an apologetic flame.

“Say excuse me. And cover your mouth.”

“Yes, Greater-than-Great-Grandmama,” whispered the Bad-Tempered Dragon.

“And tidy this mess.”

“Yes, Greater-than-Great-Grandmama.”

“And the hotel and the supermarket, whatever they are. And make sure you CLEAN OUT THE FOUNTAIN!”

The Bad-Tempered Dragon hung his head, blushed a rather dingy brown, and said in a voice you could hardly hear, “Yes, Greater-than-Great-Grandmama. Sorry.”

“I should think so. Evolution has a lot to answer for, if you ask me. Oh, and give the Museum of Antiquities a dust while you’re at it. Especially the Main Hall.”

And the great skeleton looked down at Short and Plantagenet, standing carefully clear of her big feet, and smiled. The, all of a sudden, she opened her big bony mouth wide. For one horrible moment, Short thought she was about to swallow them, but the Bad-Tempered Dragon’s Greater-than-Great-Grandmama was only yawning.

“Delicious pondweed, that,” she said, “but it’s wearing off. I’ll be getting back now. But any more trouble and—”

She glared meaningfully at the dejected dragon, and then stomped off to the Museum of Antiquities and another well-earned rest.

After that, the Bad-Tempered Dragon was a changed creature. At first he behaved better because he was terrified that Plantagenet and Short might bring his Greater-than-Great-Grandmama back again. But after a while, behaving

well grew into a habit, and he gradually became known as the Well-Tempered Dragon.

The people of Dull were most relieved. For although their town was once more not the sort to have stories told about it, as a place to live, it was much more pleasant.