

## GOBBINS

By W. J. Corbett

*Appears here with the kind permission of the copyright owner.*

ENGLAND LOOKED SET to be a wonderful place under the new reign of Good King Alf. After his coronation in London he began to scrap many unfair laws, adding just one new one. Then he sent out his messengers to spread the news throughout his kingdom, for he loved to keep in touch with his subjects, being the first good king in ages.

In the tiny hamlet of Dragonswood the people gathered on Goose Green to hear the king's new rules shouted out by Squire Groat, the local bigwig and bighead.

"From Good King Alf, greetings to our beloved subjects," bellowed Squire Groat, reading from a crackly parchment. "Your loyal love makes us very humble. God bless you all."

"Fancy Good King Alf bothering to greet and bless us," whispered Peg to her brother Will as they craned to see above the crowd.

"That's because he's a caring king," said Will. "Not like his father King Bert the Horrible who was overthrown for chopping too many heads off."

"But why is King Alf called 'Good' already?" said Peg, puzzled. "He was only crowned when the buds came out in May."

"Hush," hissed the people with fat purses, "we're trying to hear about the lenient tax laws."

The tax laws were lenient indeed. Squire Groat was beaming as he bawled them out.

"Well he would, wouldn't he," sniffed Peg. "Beam, I mean. Considering that Squire Groat owns nearly every scrap of land in the shire."

"Be quiet," hissed the poor people. "We need to know what Good King Alf is going to do about poverty."

The king's poor law was more than fair. The parchment read . . . 'that from this day we banish poverty from our realm forever . . .' which brought lusty cheers from the ragged and hungry who had been praying that their new king would not let them down. Squire Groat continued to bellow out more laws, each one sounding better than the last for somebody in the crowd.

"What a very kind king," said Peg, astonished. "I believe he's drawn up a lovely law for everyone to be pleased with."

"We won't tell you again," growled the grown-ups. "Goose Green is no place for children when important laws are being read out. We know who you are. You're those impudent Crackling kids who should be home in the forest, helping Mrs. Crackling to milk the goats and gather the firewood. So, why aren't you home being a help to your mother?"

"Because even children are entitled to hear the king's law," retorted Will. "Anyway we did our chores early this morning, and mum was very pleased."

"My daughter is at home learning her sewing stitches," snapped the fat man with a purse to match, glaring at Peg.

"And there are some daughters who hate sewing," glared Peg.

The wealthy gentleman was just about to clip Peg's ear when Squire Groat began to boom out more astonishing laws.

It was becoming clear that Good King Alf was trying to be popular by being very caring as his laws got kinder and kinder. Two laws especially pleased Will and Peg. The first read . . . 'that from this day we allow all hobbling and crackling crones to stir bat wings and toad livers in black cauldrons . . . to also own black cats with evil eyes . . . to fly around on broomsticks without the fear of being burned at the stake as a witch . . . for grandmas weren't born to be perfect.'

"That sounds just like ours," said Peg, nudging Will. "Never again will we have to bundle grandma Crackling into the cupboard when the soldiers rap on our door with their swords. Now she can stir the most horrible things and pour them down our throats in the legal name of Good King Alf."

"So long as she doesn't stir any more boil potion," winced Will. "I couldn't sit down for a week after she smeared that on."

“Be quiet!” shouted the landowners and the poachers. “We’re trying to hear about the new game-laws.”

“Concerning the game-laws,” trumpeted Squire Groat. Then his beam faded to a frown. It was obvious he hated having to read them out. But he did just in case the king didn’t feel good all the time and ordered his head to be chopped off. Concealing his anger he read from the parchment . . .

“. . . furthermore, we Good King Alf declare that if a poor man shoots a deer in the forest he will no longer be hung, drawn and quartered if caught. For even the lowliest of my subjects are entitled to a good supper.”

“That law will make dad’s day,” grinned Will. “And mine. I’m sick of dormouse and boiled cabbage.”

“And I detest baked hedgehog and carrots,” shuddered Peg. “It’s about time we all enjoyed a nice bit of venison.”

But when a new king drafts laws there is always one law that upsets someone. For Will and Peg it was the last law at the end of the scroll. Squire Groat had a look of triumph on his face as he read it out, his fat finger wagging accusingly at the two children . . .

“. . . but finally, we Good King Alf must end with a stern law. From this day we banish all dragons from our kingdom. As a concerned king I will not allow fire-breathing, gold-hoarding, damsel-ransoming pagan creatures in my realm. Any person harbouring a dragon, or even telling a dragon story will be hung, drawn and quartered in their local Goose Green. A long time ago when I was a hostage prince in my horrible father’s dungeon a dragon appeared in a blaze of light and promised that I would be king before the next new full moon. Trembling and waiting with hope in my heart, sadly I say that it was ten full moons before I was proclaimed Good King Alf. Therefore I banish all untrustworthy dragons from the land.”

“I’m beginning to wish King Bert The Horrible was still on the throne,” yelled Will, outraged. “At least he didn’t persecute dragons.”

“After all, dragons can be as late as anyone,” shouted Peg. “Perhaps the rescuing dragon went to the wrong castle by mistake. Even dragons can be confused when kings own castles all over the place.”

“Be warned, young Crackling brats, we know your secret,” said Squire Groat with satisfaction. Then, with saintly gestures, he rounded off the speech of the new king . . . “And so, my loyal subjects, let us fall to our knees and thank Him for sending you a new and caring king . . . amen.”

Squire Groat was the first to rise from his fat knees. He hurried away to prowl his lands for poachers who might already be using his deer for hunting practice. He was a worried squire indeed as he raced panting and belly-bobbling through the copses and dells of his property.

The last to leave Goose Green were Will and Peg. Shocked and shaken by the king’s dragons law, they went home with dragging feet to their humble cottage, deep in the thick green forest.

Pushing open the door a familiar scene awaited them. At the rough-hewn table sat father Crackling, smiling at some memory as he whittled a new leg for an old stool. At the fire busied mother Crackling, sniffing and tasting the hedgehog and cabbage stew bubbling in her pot. On one side of the hearth crouched granny Crackling, cackling creepy rhymes as she crumbled herbs and dried frogs eyes between her gnarly fingers. On the other side of the hearth sprawled the family pet, Gobbins, his yellow eyes intent on the pictures he saw in the glowing fire. Now and then he would flick out his tongue to collect the dead ashes from the grate, they being his favourite snack.

Gobbins was blue and green in a spotted way, but the family rarely noticed. He reeked of magic and mysterious things, but no-one thought it strange. Often he would puff out a slim jet of flame to down a troublesome bluebottle. The family thought this quite reasonable. Crisped or swatted, everybody hated bluebottles. Gobbins hated exercise. He would roll his yellow eyes when the children tied his rope-lead around his neck. But he was always good-natured as he shambled between them for his weekly stroll through the forest. In short, Gobbins was the nicest, most beloved pet in the world. He was also very useful. He was the perfect set of puffing bellows when mother Crackling needed her fire to glow. The problem was that Gobbins was now illegal. For Gobbins was a dragon, and that was the rub as children entered their cottage, Will grim-faced, Peg in floods of tears.

“Whatever’s the matter?” said their parents, concerned. “Were the new king’s laws so very bad?”

Putting an arm around his sister, Will recited Good King Alf’s laws. About how poor people were no longer allowed to be poor, and how everyone should have a nice bit of venison in their supper pots, and how witches would no longer be burned at the stake for mixing potions. That law brought a cackle of merriment from Grandma Crackling, her single tooth wagging in its socket. On her shoulder her green-eyed cat yowled his approval.

“But they sound like very good laws,” said father puzzled.

“You haven’t heard the last law of all,” wept Peg. “You tell them, Will.”

“Yes, a very terrible law,” said Will, bitterly. “It seems that Good King Alf hates dragons. Everyone who owns one is ordered to turn it in for execution. If the owners of the dragon do not obey they’ll be hung, drawn and quartered. Which means that the life of our pet is hanging by a thread.”

“What, our Gobbins’ life hanging by a thread?” said mother, shocked. “What would I do with the empty space in my hearth if they dragged him away? Who would keep the bluebottles from buzzing round my table? And who would bellow my fire into a hot glow?”

“But surely Gobbins is no threat to the king,” said father, angrily. “He wouldn’t harm a fly, except for bluebottles.”

“The king doesn’t know that,” sobbed Peg, burying her face in her mother’s greasy apron. “What will we do when Squire Groat and his men come for him?”

“Just let that fat Squire lay one finger on Gobbins,” growled father, hugging Peg to his rough woodcutter’s jerkin.

“He won’t set foot in this cottage,” cried mother Crackling, brandishing the iron poker from her fire. “Unless he wants to feel the hot end of this.”

“I’ll chant a spell to turn the king’s bones to water,” cackled grandma, spitting in the fire. “And on the night of the first full moon his ears and toes will drop off. What about Gobbins himself? He has powers enough to protect us all. His magic is strong enough to overturn all laws. But Gobbins is Gobbins and bides his time, doesn’t he, my Midnight? Don’t we bide our time, my lovely?”

The black cat on her shoulder yowled his agreement, his green eyes blazing fire, his sharp white teeth bared.

“How could Good King Alf turn out so bad?” grieved Peg, drying her eyes on the cat’s bristling fur as she stroked it.

As for Gobbins, through all the weeping and wailing and angry words he didn’t so much as twitch a pointy ear but continued to gaze into the fire. Perhaps he had listened to every word. Perhaps he hadn’t. Perhaps he really was a dragon of wondrous powers, perhaps he wasn’t. Perhaps he could save himself and his family from the chop, who knew he couldn’t? But one thing was clear. Relaxed and gazing into the fire he seemed content to leave his fate in the hands of the Crackling family who loved him.

“We could hide Gobbins up the chimney,” suggested mother. “He loves flames and smoke, so he’d come to no harm.”

Will shook his head.

“Squire Groat knows that Gobbins lives here. If he and his men came searching they’d poke a spear up the chimney and bring Gobbins tumbling down. Then they’d drag him away to have his head chopped off on Goose Green.”

“If that happened I’d lay my head on the block beside him,” said Peg, bravely. “If I can’t live with Gobbins in life, then I’ll die with him in death.”

“Is there no way out?” asked mother, her smoke-blackened eyes all weepy. “How can I cope without Gobbins on his hearth?”

“There is a way out,” said Will, thinking. “I have a plan. When it gets dark Peg and I are going to take Gobbins for the longest walk of his life.”

Gobbins rolled his yellow eyes skyward. For a non-speaking dragon he seemed to know words ever so well.

“But where will you flee with Gobbins?” asked mother, worried. “If you took him deeper into the forest Squire Groat and his men would flush him out, they being hunters.”

“Gobbins won’t be hidden in the forest,” said Will, excitedly “Our long walk is going to take us along The King’s Highway.”

“To where?” asked father.

“To London, of course,” said the boy. “There to petition Good King Alf, to plead for his life. And if the three of us don’t return, take heart. You can be sure we’ll all face our fate with brave smiles on our faces.”

“I with a red rose clasped to my breast,” said Peg, romantically. “And hugging Will and Gobbins to the very end.”

Granny Crackling cackled and spat into the fire again. She was kneading a lump of clay in the shape of a man with a crown on his head. Drawing some hedgehog quills from her ragged cloak she said, “Just let that king lay one harming hand on my three babies and he’ll feel the sharpness of these magic quills in his backside. Unless lazy Gobbins will stir himself in time to save them all from the chop,” and she cackled again, Midnight the cat spitting his fury from her shoulder.

As darkness fell the children tied the rope-lead around Gobbin’s neck and coaxed him from the warm hearth out into the chilly night.

“There’s a dragon moon tonight,” shrieked granny, waving her broomstick at the sky “The king will rue his wicked law if he dares to scoff at the signs.”

“Please, granny, we’re trying to say goodbye,” said mother Crackling. On the doorstep she hugged the three travelers. “Now remember, be polite to Good King Alf and come safely home to us.”

“For I’ll miss your laughter,” said father, awkwardly. “And your nuisance.”

“And I’ll miss a perfect set of bellows for my fire,” said mother, turning and weeping again.

“Goodbye then,” said Will and Peg, shedding tears of their own. Then, grasping Gobbins’ lead, they set off through the forest towards The King’s Highway, their path lit by a dragon moon . . .

Their troubles began the moment they stepped onto The King’s Highway. It was Gobbins’ claws. Clickerty-clack, clackerty-click, they sounded on the hard surface as he shambled along between the children.

“Please Gobbins,” they hissed. “Try to walk on your heels. Squire Groat lives in the big mansion house opposite Goose Green. We’ll never sneak by with you clickerty-clacking to wake the dead.”

But Gobbins was hopeless at walking on his heels. Will and Peg could only pray that Squire Groat was drunk or asleep when they passed his big house.

Their hopes were in vain. Just as they were hurrying past a loud bellow halted them in their tracks. Looking up they saw Squire Groat hanging from his bedroom window wearing a long white shirt and a nightcap, and holding a bright lantern.

“Where are you taking that illegal dragon?” he bawled. “And don’t say he isn’t with you. I’ve known for a long time that you Cracklings have been hiding a dragon. Now you’re trying to steal him away from the wrath of Good King Alf. Well, I’ll stop your little game. I order you to tie that beast to the maypole on Goose Green so that I can chop off his head in the morning. And you can think yourselves lucky that I won’t be hanging, drawing and quartering you two impudent children for breaking the law.”

“You’ll be all alone and fuming at that maypole in the morning,” shouted Will, defiantly. “Because Peg and Gobbins and I won’t be there. We’re taking our Gobbins down the long road to London to appeal to the king.”

“You can’t appeal against the king’s ruling,” yelled Squire Groat.

“Oh yes we can,” Peg shouted back. “We believe it’s the right of every subject to argue with the king if his laws are unfair.”

“There’s nothing about that on my parchment,” retorted the angry Squire.

“We’re going to appeal to the king’s heart, not to his parchment,” said Will. “So I suggest you shut your window and go to bed before you catch your death of cold.”

“Well,” sneered the nasty man. “It’ll save me a grisly task in the morning, for Good King Alf will doubtless top the three of you when you get to London. And good riddance, I say.”

And on that unfeeling note he slammed his window shut.

Will and Peg felt pleased to have told Squire Groat to get off. Even their pet seemed pleased. At least he had a smile on his face as they carried on down The King’s Highway, Gobbins sounding like a marching army as his claws went clickerty-clack, clackerty-click, every step of the way.

The journey to London was much further than they had thought. After just one day’s march the children collapsed with blistered heels. Silently munching their bread and cheese and fitting a nosebag of cold cinders around Gobbins’ neck, they slumped against a milestone. Wincing with pain they were steps away from giving up. Then to



their astonishment Gobbins awoke from his snooze and click-clacked into the road. Wagging his behind and smiling broadly, it was obvious what he had in mind. Delightedly the children climbed aboard his broad back to continue the journey in luxury, their pet's rolling motion soon soothing them to sleep the miles away.

The news of their mission had spread like wildfire. Often, when they stopped to pick blackberries from the hedgerows, nervous faces would peer at them through the leaves as other children in hiding with their own hunted dragons hissed 'good luck' before vanishing out of sight again . . .

"If Good King Alf is a really good king he'll see the niceness of dragons," was the cry all the way down the long and winding road . . .

Many days later the trio were breasting the final hill before London. Will and Peg looked down and gasped. The huge city sprawled as far as the eye could see, the river Thames gliding like a silver snake through its centre. For a long time the children and Gobbins gazed at the turreted towers and the golden crosses on the church spires glinting in the morning sun.

"It's a lot grander than Dragonswood," said Will, awed. "Where do you think Good King Alf lives?"

"Probably in that tallest palace," said Peg pointing. "His home has to be tall so that his high crown doesn't bump the roof. But look, Will, there's a man with a horse and cart coming along. We can ask him."

"Pardon me, sir," said Will politely as the man reigned in his horse. The cart was heaped with fish and lobsters and ponged a lot. "Could you tell us if Good King Alf lives in that very tall palace?"

"You mean Westminster," grinned the fisherman. He crossed himself. "He does, and may The Lord see the goodness in him."

"It says in his parchment of laws that he hates dragons," said Will. "He hates them so much that he's ordered all their heads to be chopped off. I can't see much goodness in that, master fisherman."

"Dragons are the salt of the earth," said Peg, hugging Gobbins who was having another snooze.

"I agree," smiled the fisherman, glancing down. "I had a dragon myself when I was your age. Wonderful company, he was. Wouldn't hurt a fly, except bluebottles."

“Which is why we have travelled all the way from Dragonswood,” explained Peg. “We are here to plead for the life of Gobbins, in fact, for the life of every dragon in the land. We’re sure that when Good King Alf sees how nice our pet is he’ll strike the unfair law from his parchment. If he doesn’t, Will and I are going to demand that we are hung, drawn and quartered beside our Gobbins.”

“I pray it doesn’t come to that, little travelers,” said the nice fisherman. “But come, climb on my cart and I’ll set you down at the foot of the king’s grand steps. If a cat can look at a king, surely a nice dragon can.”

The children coaxed Gobbins aboard the cart, eagerly scrambling up beside him. Wallowing amongst the fish and lobsters, Gobbins didn’t smile once throughout the journey down to the city. The reason was simple. Dragons hate the smell of fish. He didn’t complain, for dragons never do. But he did begin to smile again when he and the children climbed from the cart to stand before a soar of magnificent marble steps.

“I’ll give you a bit of advice that might help your cause,” said the fisherman. “It’s not much, but the king has a sickly son, Prince Fred. Win the smile of the prince and you might win the good heart of the king. And now, farewell and good luck, small law-breakers.”

“Thank you, master fisherman,” said Will and Peg, sad to see him go. “And may the memory of your own childhood dragon stay with you forevermore. And may you sell every one of your fishes and lobsters . . .”

And their friend was gone, the cart hauled away by the lovely brown horse into the hustling, shouting market-place and the depths of the city.

“I’m frightened, Will,” whispered Peg, glancing up. “These steps are made for giants.”

“We’re together, the three of us,” said Will, squeezing her hand. “We must be brave, even if our lives end here. Remember, Peg, we’ll never slink back to Dragonswood without a pardon for Gobbins.”

“The death of Gobbins will mean the death of all three,” vowed Peg. “So, Will, let us march upwards and bravely face our fate.”

Both children were hesitant to set a first foot on the marble steps, but the problem was solved for them. Once an obedient follower, Gobbins now led. Up the steps he clickerty-clacked pulling the children on the rope-lead behind him. Now he was smiling

more warmly than he had ever smiled. In fact his smile was so melting that the guards at the top of the steps fell in love with him and, forgetting their orders, allowed the three to enter through the huge doors into the Great Hall of Westminster. But then some of the guards had children who also owned illegal dragons.

Inside the hall and awed by its splendour, the children were unsure of what to do next.

“Where do you think a king would live in such a magnificent palace?” whispered Will to Peg. “He must have a hundred rooms to choose from.”

“A king would live in a throne room,” said sensible Peg. “But here comes a pretty man, he’ll tell us where to find Good King Alf.”

The man who confronted them was certainly gorgeously dressed in his red velvet cloak and his weasel-skin hat with feathers, but his face was angry. He stood haughtily barring their way, holding his long thin nose with a scented scrap of lace.

“Who allowed you into the royal palace?” he demanded. “How dare common urchins invade the privacy of the king smelling of fish? And with an outlaw dragon if my eyes don’t deceive me.”

“We are Will and Peg Crackling from Dragonswood,” said Will, defiantly. “And this outlaw is Gobbins Crackling. We have come to confront our king about his unfair dragon law”

“Anyway, who are you in your silly hat?” snapped Peg, her courage back. “I wouldn’t wear a silly thing like that even in a Goose Green Passion Play.”

“I am Lord Gushing of Creeping Castle,” answered the outraged courtier. “And no one sees His Majesty except through me. And I’ll have you know that this hat cost me a fortune in Groats, you impudent wench. But enough of this . . . guards . . . guards . . .”

The guards came rushing. Once their faces had smiled, now they were white with fear.

“Bind this outlaw in chains!” thundered Lord Gushing. “And tie the hands of these impudent whelps. Then hurl them into the king’s throne room to grovel before our good and wise law maker.”

The terrified guards obeyed. Bound and bewildered the three were dragged across the hall to another set of heavy doors. Creaking them open the guards flung their

prisoners inside. The floor of the throne room was so slippery that Will and Peg slithered the whole of its length on their stomachs, Gobbins in his clanking chains rolling over and over beside them. They came to a stop with a bump against what appeared to be a raised stage. The frightened children looked up. Over them loomed the hateful figure of Lord Gushing, evilly kicking Gobbins as he sprawled so helplessly there.

“All rise for Good King Alf and Prince Fred,” boomed a voice. There was the sound of boots shuffling and swords clanking in the echoing throne room.

Craning their heads the children saw through their tears a tall man entering the throne room wearing a very high crown. Very regally he sat down on a golden throne that was placed stage-centre. In his lap he cradled a small boy. The face of the child was pinched and blue as it coughed and wheezed in a pitiful way. Pathetically the sickly Prince Fred wore a small crown on his head that kept slipping lopsidedly each time he coughed and wailed.

“Good morning to our Noble Lord and his merry Prince Fred,” fawned Lord Gushing, bowing low “At your mighty feet lie three prisoners caught by my own hand while trying to sneak into your palace. As you’ll note, Sire, they are two common urchins and a dragon banned by your own strict law. I trust you’ll wish to scathe them with your royal tongue before I have them dragged away to the block and the scaffold? To set an example to others who would flout your mighty power?”

Good King Alf looked keenly down at Will and Peg. Then he looked at Gobbins snuffling and choking in his chains. Then he glanced at the distressed child in his lap. Something inside him stirred, for he said, “Let the children speak. Let them defend their dragon. For all of my subjects are entitled to petition their king. Free them from their bonds.”

Lord Gushing was scarlet with rage as he cut the children free with a little jewelled dagger. But he kept his face averted lest the king should see the unfair hatred he bore for ordinary children who didn’t live in castles. On the other hand the hearts of Will and Peg were filled with hope as they rubbed their sore wrists and climbed to kneel humbly before Good King Alf and his poor whooping, coughing son. Peg took extra heart to notice that the king had the nicest, kindest brown eyes she had ever seen. She nudged Will to speak, to put the case for their pet lying helpless in his chains.

“Good King Alf,” said the boy, finding his voice. “We have travelled all the way from Dragonswood to complain about the last law in your parchment. While the laws before are good, the last one is very bad.”

“And we are prepared to die if you don’t tear that law to tatters,” cried Peg, rising from her knees and pointing down at Gobbins. “Chop off his head and you can chop off mine.”

“You dare defy my dragon law?” said the King, his brown eyes kind, a smile on his regal lips. “Give me your reason, little subjects.”

“Just because you had a bad experience with a dragon doesn’t mean that all dragons are bad,” said Will. “On our way from Dragonswood lots of children and their dragons were cheering us every step of the way.”

“Even the fisherman who brought us here to your palace had a dragon when he was small,” said Peg. “And that lovely man has only fond memories of him.”

“So, even the sellers of fish in my realm question my laws,” said the King. “Tell me why my subjects love dragons so?”

“For a start they are perfect walking companions when they aren’t dragging behind on their leads,” said Peg. “And if the cooking fire is dying they are experts at bellowing it into life again.”

“Also a dragon is proof against a bluebottle in your soup,” said Will. “And no pet smiles more than a dragon when their owners are down in the dumps.”

“Like Prince Fred your son,” said Peg. “Pardon me Sir, but I think that poor lad would benefit in health if he had a dragon of his own. I’m sure he wouldn’t whoop and cough so much if he had a smiling pet like Gobbins.”

“You try to pull the wool over the eyes of His Majesty with lies?” cried the odious Lord Gushing. “Prince Fred is attended by the best doctors in the land. And you dare to say that the smile of a dragon is more effective than purges and leeches? My King, allow me to execute these three immediately.”

“Wait!” commanded the King. “Release the dragon. Let him work his magic smile upon my son, if he can. But be warned, small children, if your Gobbins proves to be a fraud I will lawfully order him to the chopping block.”

Gobbins was unbound from his chains. Cramped with pain he slowly got to his clawed feet, stretching and flicking his long tail, his yellow eyes blinking in the light

from the smoky torches that illuminated the throne room. At that moment Will and Peg were praying that granny Crackling was right and that their pet was much more than a lazy hearth dragon. Please, grant us just a smidgen of magic, was their prayer.

There was total silence in the hall as the king leant from his throne and held out his sickly son. Gobbins advanced, his beautiful-ugly head almost touching the boy. And Gobbins smiled the sweetest smile the world had ever seen as he flicked out his long tongue and gently licked that poor, pinched face. And all at once Prince Fred was healthily-pink and kicking, his delighted chuckles ringing round the throne room amid the gasps of astonishment from the nobles gathered there. For all had witnessed a miracle, or a touch of loving, dragon magic. For every child knew that dragons love children.

The kind brown eyes of Good King Alf were filled with tears as he rose from his throne with his drawn sword. Will and Peg were filled with alarm as he brought down the blade on Gobbins. But their fears were unfounded.

“Arise, Sir Gobbins of Dragonswood,” said the king. Then he raised his voice so that all should hear his words. “And from this day We, Good King Alf, do tear the unfair dragon law from our parchment. From this day my healed son Prince Fred will have a dragon of his own to love and take for walks. We have spoken . . .”

And then he chucked Will and Peg under their chins, ordering the fuming Lord Gushing that the three be honoured with a royal escort all the way back to Dragonswood.

It was truly like a royal procession as the children and Gobbins were borne back along the King’s Highway towards home. The news had spread far and wide. Children no longer lurked in the hedgerows with their dragons as the colourful party passed, Gobbins wearing a golden sash around his blue and green spotted shoulders, smiling broader than ever.

“Hurrah for Sir Gobbins of Dragonswood and the Crackling children!” was the cry. “Who cares if they stink of fish. Now we can come out of the cupboard and fill Merry England with all the dragons it deserves.”

“I can’t wait to see Squire Groat’s face,” said Peg with a giggle as they neared Goose Green.

“Make way for a knight in the realm!” bawled the captain of the escort as the pompous squire tried to bar their way with bluster. Because he was drunk the news hadn’t reached him.

“What knight?” shouted Squire Groat. “All I see is an illegal dragon coming back under escort to have his head chopped off on Goose Green.”

“You’d chop off the head of Sir Gobbins of Dragonswood?” said the stern captain of the escort. “Beware I don’t chop off yours. This dragon and these children are under the protection of Good King Alf. Get out of the way or suffer the wrath of the king.”

“Unless you want the King to fine you and your rich purse, Squire Groat!” shouted Peg. “Never think of coming to poke your nose up our chimney for dragons again.”

“And may all your candles on your rich table blow out,” said Will. “Because you’ve spent your life snuffing out the candles of others.”

Squire Groat was a broken man as he tottered to slump beneath the maypole on Goose Green. When they weren’t cheering the triumphant return of the trio the people of Dragonswood were jeering him for the way he had treated them for so many years. There was only one soul with compassion for a pompous, now deflated man. Gobbins paused in his progress to clickerty-clack from the road, lick the tip of the man’s red nose, because, who knows, perhaps even a wicked man can be healed by the forgiving love of a dragon . . .

Will and Peg burst open the door of the cottage deep in the forest. They had so much to say, so much excitement bursting to come out. But they couldn’t find the words as their home was as blessedly, peacefully calm as it had ever been. Father was sitting and smiling and fitting a second new leg on an old stool, mother was bending over her pot of bubbling venison stew, whilst grandma Crackling cackled as ever in her secret world, her scary cat yowling on her shoulder. For some time the children stood there, words forgot, just glad to be home. Gobbins made the first move. With a wide smile he ambled to fill the empty space beside the hearth. Sighing he slumped back into his beloved role of a lazy hearth-dragon, glad to puff mother’s dying fire into a bright flame again.

“Mum . . . dad . . .” said Peg, at last. “Do you know the king has torn the unfair dragon law from his parchment, all because of Gobbins?”

“I’m not surprised, dear,” said her mother.

“And would you believe that our pet is now Sir Gobbins of Dragonswood?” said Will to his dad.

“About time too,” smiled the wood-carving man. “But nobleness runs in our family.”

“And magic,” screeched granny, cackling with laughter and digging the smiling Gobbins in the ribs.

“And love,” said Will and Peg, sitting down to the rough-hewn table to enjoy a steaming bowl of venison stew.

And it was a lovely full moon in the forest that night. The same moon that was shining on a happy king and his happy son.

Good night.