

JOHN ROBERT AND THE DRAGON'S EGG

by Thomas N. Scortia

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ON A WARM sunny day in late June, John Robert walked through the dusty tobacco field of his Uncle Ben's farm toward the dirty white four-room farmhouse, carrying a dragon's egg wrapped in his faded blue denim shirt.

In all of his eight years he knew that nothing quite as wonderful had ever happened to him. Not even the time the merry-go-round truck had broken down in St. Basile in front of Beauchamp's General Store and the driver had let him peek at the enamelled and gilded wooden horses through the heavy slats of their pine crates.

Not even the impossible joy of riding one of those great black and golden stallions could ever be quite as wonderful as this.

The first person John Robert saw, as he rounded the decaying double building that served as the chicken house and barn, was Grandpa Riley, sitting on the back porch, rocking and smoking his smelly black pipe.

"John Robert," the old man said, pulling his pipe from his mouth, "whut you doing 'thout your shirt on? You'll get your back blistered good and proper and then your Aunt Bess will really land on you."

"Ain't no fear o' that," John Robert said. "I'm good and brown already. See." He turned in a slow circle, exhibiting his back.

"Like plug tobacco," Grandpa agreed. "Whut you got in the shirt, John Robert?"

"It's a dragon's egg," John Robert said proudly.

"Do tell. Can't recollect ever seeing one o' them." The old man leaned forward in his rocker. "Unfold it and let's fetch a look," he demanded.

John Robert carefully folded back the layers of blue cloth. The egg was about four inches long and looked very much like a large hen's egg except that its surface was wrinkled and glistened like wet leather.

“Huh, it’s sort o’ greenish,” Grandpa Riley observed. “Where’d you get it?”
“Found it down in the swamp ... on the bank in a sort o’ mud nest.”

“Better not tell your Aunt Bess. She told you to stay away from that swamp. She’ll whop you good.”

“Don’t tell Aunt Bess what?” Aunt Bess demanded as her thin form appeared at the sagging screen door and she stepped out, blinking into the sun.

“Now’ll you catch it,” Grandpa whispered.

“John Robert, whut you got in your nice clean shirt?” she demanded. John Robert saw her hands move to her hips in the familiar gesture of annoyance.

“Dragon’s egg,” he said in a small voice.

“Huh! More’n likely a dirty ’gator egg.”

“It is not,” he said. “They was tracks all around it. Big tracks with claws.”

Aunt Bess frowned and Grandpa Riley started to move away.

“Dragon’s tracks,” John Robert added triumphantly.

“Gator tracks,” Aunt Bess insisted. “Pa,” she raised her voice, “you come back here and take this boy and make him get rid of that dirty egg.”

“I was just gonna . . .”

“Never you mind. Get rid of that dirty egg.” She opened the door and went into the kitchen, mumbling, “Where does that boy get such . . .”

“Pa,” she called over her shoulder, “now mind.” They heard her voice sink to an almost inaudible mutter of complaint.

“Well, John Robert,” Grandpa Riley said. He shoved his pipe into his mouth so hard that John Robert heard it click against his store teeth.

“Do we have to?”

“Wouldn’t dast keep it.”

“I wanted to hatch it.” John Robert bit his lip. “She don’t need to know.”

“Real dragon tracks, you say?” Grandpa Riley’s voice sank to a whisper and the corners of his eyes crinkled.

“Uh, huh . . . With three toes and claws.”

“Course, ’gator eggs is hard, not soft and wrinkly like this’n.” Grandpa paused in thought, then grabbed John Robert’s arm and pulled him toward the deserted chicken house that leaned limply against the larger barn.

“Tell you what, John Robert,” he said.

That evening at dinner John Robert sat silently opposite Grandpa Riley and slowly mashed the boiled potatoes into his plate with the worn fork and thought grand thoughts. Occasionally he would steal a secret look at Grandpa and think of the treasure wrapped carefully in layer on layer of flannel and hidden in a warm corner of the hen house.

Grandpa hadn't been sure if the egg needed warmth or whether it would hatch without extra heat as does a turtle's egg or an alligator's egg. However, since they had nothing to serve as an incubator, they had compromised on wrapping the egg in an old flannel nightshirt of Uncle Ben's and placing the bundle so that the sun would fall on the egg most of the day through one of the two windows, in the hen house.

A kind of nervous excitement had seized John Robert and, though Aunt Bess complained tiredly at dinner to Uncle Ben, who had returned late from the cotton mill, John Robert scarcely heard her.

"Look at that boy," she fretted, "playing with his good food when prices is so high a body can barely make do." Uncle Ben gave a tired grunt and continued to eat. "He shore don't take after his ma and pa, God rest their souls, with him dreamin' and lazin' his time away. Why, would you believe it . . ."

And she was off on the incident of the dragon's egg. Grandpa Riley gave his daughter a pained look and attacked his food with new vigor.

Later, after the oil lamp had been lighted in the kitchen and they had washed and dried the dishes, John Robert sat on the porch, watching the glowing cinder of Grandpa Riley's pipe and listening to the creak of his rocker mingle with the shrill music of the crickets and the katydids. Uncle Ben sat inside at the kitchen table, reading his newspaper, while Aunt Bess, who never came out after dark because of the mosquitoes from the swamp, sat opposite him, sewing on the wedding ring quilt she was making. Occasionally, John Robert could hear her shrill voice raised in comment.

"Ain't Aunt Bess ever been happy?" John Robert asked.

"Well, I recollect she used to be different . . . maybe even a little 'like you, John Robert."

"Whut happened?"

Grandpa Riley sucked thoughtfully at his pipe.

"I guess she just grew up," he said.

They sat silently, savouring the heavy night air.

“Grandpa,” John Robert asked at last, “where do dragons come from?”

“Oh, all places, John Robert.”

“Where?”

“China, Japan, Araby, places you and me never even heard tell of. Maybe places nobody on this earth’s heard tell of.”

“Oh,” John Robert was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Maybe he’ll want to fly back there.”

“Maybe . . . if he’s the flyin’ kind.”

“Oh, he’ll be the flyin’ kind,” John Robert insisted. “And maybe . . .”

“John Robert,” Aunt Bess’s voice pierced his words, “you get yourself in here and warsh them feet and get to bed.”

John Robert spent the rest of the week in rising anticipation, stealing to the secret hiding place at every opportunity to observe the progress of the egg. It quickly became apparent that this was a very unusual egg indeed. For one thing the shell itself appeared to be elastic and, as the week progressed, the wrinkled surface filled out and the egg enlarged with surprising rapidity until it resembled a circus balloon, filled with water to the point of bursting. In addition, other, more startling changes became apparent.

“First time I ever seen an egg purple and gold,” Grandpa Riley remarked with some excitement. The egg had indeed changed color from its original bilious green. By Friday the deepening shades of mottled purple and gold had assumed an iridescent sheen and the surface seemed to catch the light and throw it back into the eyes of the viewer in a rainbow shower of color.

“Like the wings of a butterfly,” Grandpa observed. “Same color as a purple swallowtail.”

Aunt Bess noticed the increased tension and the furtive visits to the hen house. Since only the larger barn was still used and that only for storing a drum of kerosene for the household lamps, she demanded to know why John Robert and Grandpa Riley were “a-skulkin’ around that place.” For once Grandpa Riley managed to appear innocent under Aunt Bess’s sharp questioning and after a while she found something more immediate to occupy her thoughts.

The egg hatched on Sunday.

“Well,” Grandpa admitted, “it sure ain’t no ’gator.”

“It ain’t quite what I expected,” John Robert said, holding the foot-long reptile in his lap and stroking it gently. The animal made a soft cooing sound every time his fingers brushed the soft fleshy ridge that ran from its forehead down its back to the tip of its tail. A tiny forked tongue darted out to brush John Robert’s hand.

“Well, I told you he mightn’t be the flyin’ kind,” Grandpa said.

“Maybe, these’ll be wings.” John Robert hopefully touched the filmy sac-like protrusions on each side of the fleshy ruff.

“Maybe,” Grandpa admitted. “Whut’ll we call him?”

“You ’member that book I used to have, the one with the green cover?”

Grandpa scratched his chin.

“You mean *The Laughing Dragon of Oz*?”

“That one. Let’s call him Ozzie. You like that, Grandpa?”

“Uh, hm-m-m-m,” Grandpa said thoughtfully. “ ’Course, he’ll have to grow some to fit that name.”

Ozzie cooed indignantly.

“He’ll get real big,” John Robert said belligerently. “I know he will.”

“Probably grow just like a weed, considerin’ how fast the egg growed,” Grandpa agreed. “Wonder what he eats?”

“People?” John Robert hazarded.

“Little small for that, don’t you reckon? Anyway, don’t know as how we could get any for him.”

The problem of what to feed young Ozzie proved less difficult than they feared. John Robert tried him on carrots. Ozzie ate them, tops and all.

Grandpa tried potato peels. Ozzie munched them contentedly and then polished off the cardboard box in which Grandpa had smuggled them from the kitchen.

In rapid succession Ozzie demonstrated a taste for coffee grounds, buttons, hay, handkerchiefs, pipe tobacco and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He grew rapidly on this varied diet and by the end of the second week he was over three feet long from blunt nose to arrow-pointed tail.

The hen house was rapidly becoming too small to hold Ozzie, who, with increasing size, had become restless. John Robert and Grandpa Riley discussed transferring him to the tool room in the rear half of the barn. This, of course,

increased the hazard of Aunt Bess's stumbling onto their secret. The decision was finally forced upon them.

On Wednesday of the third week after the arrival of Ozzie, John Robert and Grandpa Riley sneaked into the hen house. Ozzie greeted them with a low bubbling moan. The cause of his anguish was easily discerned. He had devoured the lower six inches, nails and all, of three planks that made up one wall of the hen house.

“He sure has an appetite,” John Robert observed. Ozzie rubbed his glistening back against John Robert’s legs and groaned. He buried his muzzle in the boy’s midsection and burped softly.

“Tarnation,” Grandpa said, “ain’t there nothing you won’t eat?”

Ozzie eyed him reproachfully and his blunt head drooped.

“Tarnation,” Grandpa Riley repeated, withdrawing his foot as Ozzie began to nibble on the leather of his left toe. From one scaly nostril dribbled the faintest wisp of gray smoke.

“That settles it,” Grandpa said. “We’ll have to use the tool shed and Bess be hanged if she finds out. Good thing the stone foundation comes up about four feet in back,” he added, observing the smoke. “Wonder if he’s going to start spurtin’ fire?”

Ozzie was installed in his new home and, as his growth increased, John Robert and Grandpa Riley were increasingly thankful for the stone foundation of the barn. Ozzie, depending on his diet of the moment, would snort smoke and on occasion even small tongues of flame. With developing maturity, however, he showed no sign of the legendary fierceness of his kind. The growths on his back had enlarged to leathery sacs with the irregular appearance of wadded damp canvas. They did not share the shifting colors of his body, but remained a dirty gray. By the end of July they were as big as basket-balls and growing daily. Ozzie was over fourteen feet long by then, a mottled golden, and increasingly difficult to contain in the tool room. It was inevitable that Aunt Bess should discover him.

It happened on the first Sunday of August, just a month before John Robert's scheduled return to school. Aunt Bess, still in her church dress and shoes, carried the old tin measuring cup with which she filled the oil lamps out to the barn to get kerosene. John Robert and Grandpa Riley were standing warily on the porch, their fingers crossed, when they heard a ragged scream which quickly

choked into an inarticulate gurgle. Aunt Bess clawed her way through the double doors of the barn. Her eyes were rolling wildly and she was missing a shoe.

“It came through the wall,” she wailed. “I was filling the cup and it poked its head through the wall.” She fell limply to the porch as Uncle Ben thrust his head outside.

“What the Sam Hill’s goin’ on out here?” he demanded.

“There’s a monster in the barn,” Aunt Bess screamed. “It’s drinking my coal oil.”

“Oh, my,” said John Robert.

“Tarnation,” said Grandpa and they ran for the barn. Inside they found Ozzie, leaning against the drum of kerosene, his forked tongue darting out to pull in a growing puddle under the open spigot. The fleshy ruff down his neck was an inflamed brick red. He looked up as John Robert and Grandpa Riley appeared and rumbled inquiringly.

“Get him outside before he burps,” Grandpa yelled and they circled to the rear of the dragon. John Robert nudged him gently with his hands and then pushed harder. Ozzie resisted feebly and then began to stumble for the open doors.

“Look,” John Robert yelled, “he chewed his way right through the wall.”

“That ain’t all,” Grandpa said as Ozzie weaved into the yard and Aunt Bess wailed another long sobbing wail. “The critter’s drank up every bit o’ that coal oil.”

They followed Ozzie into the open and quickly herded him around the barn toward the open tobacco field. Just as the dragon pushed through into the open field, he hiccupped wrackingly. Then he gave a monstrous burp. A six-foot jet of smoky flame splashed down the furrows. Ozzie sank to the rough ground and emitted a soft moan.

“Heh, heh,” said Grandpa, “what a stomachache you’re gonna have.”

“Stand back,” Uncle Ben shouted, running around the corner of the barn and flourishing a double-barreled shotgun over his head. “Stand back whilst I blast the varmint.”

“No,” John Robert yelled.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Grandpa said, placing himself in front of Uncle Ben’s rush.

“Hic,” Ozzie said and a thick oily cloud of smoke enveloped his head.

It was fully twenty minutes before John Robert and Grandpa Riley could persuade Uncle Ben that Ozzie was harmless. By that time the dragon had exhausted his charge of kerosene. Occasionally, he would give a low moan while a tendril of black smoke as from a dying fire would trickle from his nostrils.

“You mean that hellion’s a pet?” Uncle Ben demanded.

“Yep,” Grandpa said proudly. “John Robert and me hatched and raised him unbeknownst from an egg.”

“He’s real gentle. Honest,” John Robert said. “Just kinda young.”

“That critter young? Why, he’d make four horses.”

“Just a pup, though,” Grandpa insisted. “Only two months old.”

“Whut you been feeding him? A cow a day?”

“Nope. Been on hay and grass for three weeks.”

“Is it gone?” Aunt Bess asked, sticking her head around the barn.

She saw Ozzie and started to withdraw. Uncle Ben motioned her on.

“Come here, Bess,” he commanded. “We got us an honest-to-bob dragon.”

It rained that night for the first time in several weeks, a slow monotonous drizzle that collected in puddles in the backyard and turned the tobacco field behind the house into a soupy morass of yellow mud. John Robert and Grandpa Riley spent most of the evening after supper in the barn, ministering to Ozzie. The dragon was weak and shaken and his scales were a lusterless yellow. The enigmatic sacs on his back were pulsing feebly and they had become quite tender to the touch. At length Grandpa Riley was satisfied that they could do no more and they left Ozzie in a troubled sleep.

The next morning Uncle Ben announced that he was not going to work. Instead, he planned to be gone for several days on a trip to New Orleans to see a man whom he knew. Aunt Bess packed him a lunch in a shoe box and, after a whispered conversation in a corner of the kitchen with occasional glances in John Robert’s and Grandpa’s direction, she accompanied Uncle Ben to the door. Shortly thereafter, John Robert heard the coughing of Uncle Ben’s aged pick-up truck recede into the distance.

At just a few minutes before ten, Grandpa Riley called John Robert to the barn.

“Real amazin’,” he said as he ushered John Robert into the back. John Robert could scarcely believe his eyes. Ozzie was stretched out lazily on a mound

of straw, basking in the sunlight that streamed through a window. The great sacs during the night had ruptured, releasing two membranous masses which, under the drying effect of the sun, were assuming form and rigidity.

“He is one of the flyin’ kind,” John Robert said ecstatically. “I told you so.”

“Sure looks like it,” Grandpa admitted.

After some conversation, they decided to brave Aunt Bess’s displeasure and lead Ozzie into the yard to take better advantage of the sun.

The wings were large and rustled like wet leather when Ozzie moved. Under the open sun, they lost their early transparency and quickly became opaque, sharing the brilliancy of his scale coloration. By evening he was already making tentative flying motions and John Robert marvelled at the great muscles that flexed in Ozzie's chest at each increasingly certain movement.

The evening meal was a silent one, full of tenseness and excitement. Aunt Bess sat silently opposite John Robert, her face strained and thoughtful.

“Bess, you’re looking mighty nervous,” Grandpa remarked.

“Well, who wouldn’t with that thing out in the barn,” she said, biting her lip.

“Now, Bess. Ozzie ain’t no ‘thing.’ Just like a pet.”

“Well, won’t be no bother after this week,” she said.

John Robert looked up from his plate in alarm.

“Whut’s that supposed to mean?” Grandpa demanded.

“I . . . well, you might as well know,” Aunt Bess said slowly. “Ben says a dragon’d be worth a right smart to some folks. He’s gone to see a circus man he knows. Figures we’ll get enough maybe even to buy a new car.”

John Robert jumped to his feet. “You can’t do that,” he protested. “Ozzie ain’t yourn.”

“Now, boy,” Aunt Bess said nervously, “you got to look at it the practical way. Whut you want with a dragon anyway?”

“John Robert's right,” Grandpa said. “Ozzie ain’t yourn to sell.”

“You keep still, Pa,” Aunt Bess’s voice became hard and firm. “Life’s too hard for your and John Robert’s fancy notions. Somebody’s got to think of the bread and butter in this house. Besides, Ben’s the head of the house. He pays the bills and I couldn’t change his mind.

“Even if I wanted to,” she added after a moment.

And she began to talk of the many fine things they would buy after they had sold Ozzie to the circus.

John Robert had little to say the rest of the evening. Several times he found Aunt Bess looking at him with the strangest expression on her face and he wondered what she must be thinking behind those silent eyes. He had never known her to be so silent and withdrawn. Her expression, he realized, seemed almost apologetic as though she were somehow a little sorry for what she was doing. But, if she felt any regret, he knew that this would not interfere with the harsh demands of her life that said Ozzie must be sold.

When bedtime finally arrived, he lay awake, tossing on his mattress on the kitchen floor. He could hear the creak of Grandpa's couch in the living room and he knew that the old man must be having as much difficulty as he in getting to sleep.

Finally he dozed, but he awoke again in the early morning before the dawn when the bright yellow light of the full moon fell through the kitchen window and on his lids. He lay, thinking of Ozzie in the barn and the sudden exciting freedom of his new wings. He saw him imprisoned in a circus cage, iron bars shutting him from the vastness of the upper air, and he felt sudden wetness on his lids.

A voice said, "Ps-s-t," and he sat up. Grandpa Riley was tiptoeing through the door, his shoes in his hands. He was fully dressed.

"Grandpa," John Robert demanded, "whut you doing up?"

"Not so loud," Grandpa shushed. "You know," he said in a low voice, "I been thinking."

"So have I," John Robert said. "About Ozzie. It ain't fair to him."

"John Robert," Grandpa said slowly, "there ain't really any place here for a young boy and an old man. Bess means well, but . . . Well, she don't see things the way you and me do."

"I know," John Robert said. "I like her and Uncle Ben, but she just don't seem to enjoy life any more."

"Maybe it's 'cause life's taken something out o' her," Grandpa said.

"You know," the old man said after a moment, "why don't you and me just take a little trip? They wouldn't miss us after a week or two."

John Robert jumped to his feet and began to pull on his clothes. They made their way silently through the moonlit yard to the barn. Ozzie awake with a sleepy rumble and they led him outside.

“Think he can carry us both?” Grandpa asked.

“ ‘Course he can. Ozzie’s the strongest dragon in creation.”

They led him into the damp tobacco field.

“Needs a good long runway,” Grandpa said. “Trifle muddy, though.”

“Where’ll we go?” John Robert laughed. “India? Araby?”

“Why, we’ll go far away where no human’s ever been before,” Grandpa said. “He knows where.”

They mounted, Grandpa in front, and held tightly to Ozzie’s back. He sensed what was expected of him and eagerness poured into his body. The great muscles tensed, the clawed feet churned the muddy ground, found firm footing, and suddenly, with the smoothness of a skate slipping over ice, they soared up and up . . . over the tiny house and barn below, over the moon-flecked fields.

The wind whipped through John Robert’s hair and he could barely breathe as he pressed himself forward against Grandpa Riley’s thin frame.

“Egypt and Africa and Araby and all the faraway places where nobody but him and his kind know!” John Robert yelled into the wind. “What will Aunt Bess and Uncle Ben say?”

“They’ll never tell anyone. Why, they won’t ever guess the truth,” Grandpa gasped, his voice whipping back into John Robert’s ear.

“Oh, they will. They will. They’ll know,” John Robert shouted. “Look.”

He pointed down below as they banked sharply and swooped back over the tiny house below. Even at their speed they could see clearly the line of heavy tracks that led into the moon-bright tobacco field, led into its very center and then mysteriously came to an end.

And they could even see the tiny human figure that stood by the house, her head turned upward, her eyes shaded by a bare arm.

“Goodbye!” Grandpa Riley yelled.

“Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye,” John Robert called into the cold wind.

And below the small figure waved uncertainly - regretfully.

Then the field, the house, the dappled landscape of stippled fields and tiny buildings dissolved in a misty kaleidoscope of brilliant yellow as the great winged beast completed his turn and fled swiftly toward the already brightening east.