

THE CHRISTMAS DRAGON

By Vivian French

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Old Fox came pattering through the woods, leaving sharp little paw prints in the crisp white snow.

“Cooooee!” he called. “Are you awake?”

Dragon opened a heavy-lidded eye. Puffs of smoke floated into the air, and over Old Fox’s head. Old Fox sneezed.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” he complained. “The smoke gets up my nose.”

Dragon opened the other eye. “I am a dragon,” he said.

Old Fox sneezed twice more. “Well—I suppose you can’t help it. At least it keeps things warm round here.”

Dragon nodded, and yawned.

“Hey!” Old Fox came closer. “Hey—what are you doing? You’re not going back to sleep, are you?”

Dragon sighed, and a flicker of fire sizzled across the snow in front of Old Fox’s paws.

“Ooof!” Old Fox jumped back. “Careful!”

Dragon smiled a slow smile. “I’m sorry, old friend. But if you’ve nothing else to say...” His eyes began to close.

“NO!” Old Fox said sharply. “Listen! I’ve come specially—I’ve come to ask you to spend Christmas with us!”

Dragon stirred a little. “Christmas?”

“Yes...” Old Fox waved a paw in the air. “You know...twelve days of fun and feasting, jollity, jugglers—all that kind of thing. Holly, carols...hot dinners...”

“Mmmmm...” Dragon opened his eyes and peered at Old Fox. “Are you up to something?” he asked.

Old Fox looked away, and twirled his whiskers. “What, me? No, no...we just thought you’d fancy a touch of merriment...a friendly face or two.”

“I was thinking of settling down for a good long rest,” Dragon said. “I’ve never been much in demand around Christmas.”

“Not even when it snows?” Old Fox sounded amazed.

“Ahhhh...so that’s it.” Dragon nodded his heavy head.

“What? What do you mean?”

“You’re finding the weather cold, Old Fox. You’re thinking of warmth...and flames...and Christmas fires blazing away...”

“Oh yes!” Old Fox said eagerly. “How did you guess?”

Dragon sighed a long heavy sigh that blew swirls of snow up into the air and sent a spiral of smoke circling round Old Fox, making him cough and splutter.

“A dragon’s fire wouldn’t be a comfort for a cold fox’s toes,” Dragon said. “If you’re wanting a Christmas blaze, you’d be safer collecting twigs and logs and branches...”

Old Fox stroked his nose in a thoughtful way.

“You don’t think that a few small puffs and blows might be arranged? Perhaps in return for a wonderful Christmas feast?”

Dragon looked at Old Fox, then turned his head away. He breathed out, a long steady breath. The flames flew high and bright, flaring and flaming against the whiteness of the snow. There was a scorching heat, a crackling, a hissing, and a sizzling. Trees at the edge of the clearing lost their white frosting and turned black and charred. The grass was blackened and burnt as far as Old Fox could see.

“Hmmm.” Old Fox coughed.

“Well well well,” he said. “Actually—perhaps I should say goodbye now. I think I’ll be off to pick up a few sticks, a few seasonal logs...”

He trotted off to the shelter of the trees, and then turned. “Have a good sleep,” he said, “and a very happy Christmas.”

Dragon smiled. His head sank down between his steely-clawed feet, and he closed his eyes.

It was very quiet.

Dragon lay still, with the stillness of stones, or hills, or slate grey mountains. Wisps of dreams hovered in the air above his head...dreams of sweeping velvet dresses...silver gleaming armoured knights...tall towers casting dark shadows...the

distant beating of horses' hooves...and while he dreamed, days and weeks and months drifted by.

Not just one Christmas came and went, or two or three or four...but tens of tens of Christmasses, and tens of tens again and again and again...

and time ticked on...

and on...

and on...

It was bitterly cold. The wind whistled in between the dustbins, shaking and rattling the tins and bottles and scraps of card and paper. Young Fox hurrying round the corner, shivering. With a rush and a swirl the wind whisked the sprig of holly from behind his ear and tossed it away, and tugged at the small bag of wizened apples and scraps of bread that Young Fox was carrying.

"Brrr," said Young Fox, and paused behind a bin to shelter for a moment. It was warmer than he had expected, and he yawned, and sat down. The warmth crept up to toast his toes and tail. Young Fox's eyes closed, and he curled up into a ball and slept.

It was dark. It was darker than Dragon had ever known darkness to be, and there was a strange heaviness. It seemed to Dragon that there were hills and forests and mountains pressing down on him. He breathed deeply, and began to stir.

Young Fox let out a terrified howl. The earth was heaving and lifting, and the dustbins fell over and rolled away with a deafening clatter. Smoke and dust swirled in the cold air, and Young Fox was tossed head over heels as the ground rose beneath him. As he staggered back on to his feet he could hear stones rattling and clattering on every side.

Slowly the dust settled, and the smoke cleared.

Young Fox and Dragon looked at each other, and Young Fox sneezed.

Dragon shook the earth from his nostrils and smiled. "Still sneezing, old friend?" he said.

Young Fox was speechless. He stared and stared at Dragon, his eyes popping.

Dragon yawned, a huge cavernous jagged-toothed yawn.

"I see the snow's gone," he said. "Was it a white Christmas? Did you have your twelve days of holly and hot dinners? Festivals and feasting?"

“We...we haven’t had Christmas yet,” Young Fox said, his voice a whisper. “We...we don’t really have that sort of Christmas round here, sir. There’s not a lot to have, you see...”

Dragon lowered his huge head to look at Young Fox more closely.

“What? No jollity? No jesting? No feasting?” Dragon blinked his heavy eyelids. He turned, and began to look about him. He saw the tall chimneys, the factories, the dark alleyways, and the long shadows that fell across the clearing.

“Where are the trees?” he asked, his voice deep and rumbling.

Young Fox shifted uneasily from foot to foot. “Er...I don’t think there are any trees round here,” he said. “It’s been like this as long as I’ve known it, sir...”

Dragon began to heave his long scaly body up and out of the rubble. Plumes of smoke soared up into the air. Young Fox sneezed, and then coughed.

“Er...that is, excuse me, sir...but are you leaving?”

There was a hollow rasping as Dragon unfurled his wings. Young Fox saw they were ragged and tattered and torn.

“I want to bring back the sunshine and the sky,” Dragon said, staring angrily at the tall sooty chimneys that reached up above him.

“Fancy,” said Young Fox. “I mean...won’t that be...that is, isn’t that rather difficult?”

Dragon rippled his dusty scales, and flexed his dirty broken claws.

“Once,” he said, “a small puff of my breath turned all the trees around this space to blackened ash. One long strong blast of flame, and the way will be clear for them to grow again.”

Young Fox jumped up. “WHAT? You mean you could burn all this away? Knock it down?”

Dragon nodded. “One beat of my wings,” he said, “and towers will topple.”

“But you mustn’t!” Young Fox beat his paws against Dragon’s steel sides. “You can’t—that is, PLEASE, sir—it’s where we live!”

Dragon became very still.

“You don’t understand—” Young Fox was trembling in his eagerness to explain. “I know it isn’t much to a big grand creature like you—just a few bins and things — but we live here, and at Christmas we get together and have a bit of a song and a supper,

and we wish each other all the best...oh, if you could see it, you'd understand, I know you would! OH! Oh—just one moment.” Young Fox spun round and began scrabbling among the stones. Feverishly he snatched up as many of the apples and scraps of bread as he could find, and scurrying back he dropped them at Dragon's feet.

“Here!” he said. “Here! You have them! Have them as a very Happy Christmas present from me, and please please PLEASE come and join us tomorrow. We'll all be ever so glad to see you and to share what we've got, although...” he gave his gifts a longing glance, “there may not be much...”

Young Fox's voice died away. Dragon made no move to take the apples or the bread.

He was standing over the clearing, his eyes half closed, his massive bulk unmoving. Young Fox drooped.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “What does it matter to you? But you would have liked it...there's nothing quite like Christmas.” And he sighed, and moved towards the darkest of the alleyways.

“One moment, dear friend.”

Young Fox stopped. Dragon's voice was gentle, and as Young Fox turned there was a shuddering under his feet as Dragon wearily folded his wings and sank his mountainous body back among the stones.

“You're quite right,” Dragon said slowly. “Christmas is not the time for anger, and burning, and destruction. No time at all...” His voice was echoing hollowly now. “Maybe one day there will be a time for me...or maybe...not...”

Dragon's head lay heavily on the tumbled earth. Young Fox saw his eyes close, and, creeping closer, he wondered if he was even breathing. A faint mist hung about him now, and it was difficult for Young Fox to see if Dragon was really there lying in the clearing, or if a heap of rocks and stones and pebbles had fallen into the likeness of a strange and fantastic beast.

The wind blew—a wild gust that picked up the mist and whisked it away. For a moment Young Fox thought he saw an eye flicker in the shadows, but he couldn't be certain. It was growing dark, and thoughts of home and the coming Christmas were tugging at his mind. The wind whistled again, and a small sprig of holly flew into the air and dropped on to the silent mound that lay stone still in the twilight.

Young Fox shivered, and trotted off into the darkness. He hadn't gone far when he stopped and hurried back.

"It is Christmas," he said as he carefully picked up his scraps and apples. "And they'll be expecting something..." He hopped over a dustbin lid and saw the sprig of holly. He paused, then shook his head.

"I'll leave it," he said.

The first snowflakes were drifting down as Young Fox pattered down the alleyway that led him home.

"Happy Christmas!" he called over his shoulder. "Happy Christmas!"