

THE DRAGON BROTHERS

By W. J. Corbett

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ONE STORMY NIGHT in the Magic Forest the dragons found a baby under a bush. He was wrapped in a cloak and crying bitterly. Beside him lay a lady, her face white in death.

“The unknown lady is at peace,” said the first dragon, pity in his eyes. “But the child still clings to life. Let us take him home and raise him as our own. He will be company for our pride and joy.”

“I agree,” said his wife, breathing warm air over their find. “If we can raise one son to become big and strong we can surely raise two. But handle the child gently, for he’s already precious to me.”

Then with a gentle nose she scraped a grave and buried the poor lady under the bush where she had died. And the storm dashed blue rose petals from the bush onto the mound of earth as if to mourn the dead mother.

Back home in the cave the baby was unwound from the sodden cloak and fed a rich broth of mushrooms and milk and healing herbs. Then he was tucked into the nest, where he fell quickly to sleep, lulled by a dragon lullaby that grieved for all sons who must die because dragons and humans could not live together in peace.

The flickering glow from the ever-burning fire lit up the cave. The walls were hung with gold and jewels and a booty of battles hoarded down the centuries, for dragons prized such things. The fire also illuminated the finger-ring strung around the baby’s neck on a twist of twine, its blue-rose emblem stirring great troubles in the hearts of the dragons. For it was the ring of a prince, of a dragon-slayer. But because they loved their new son completely the dragons stifled their fears, refusing to see future danger in the face of an innocently sleeping child.

The dragon brothers grew big and strong. Many happy days they spent playing together in the sunny glades of the Magic Forest. Small animals and birds would flee in alarm when the brothers staged their mock duels.

“Beware my glittering sword lest it should pierce your heart, wicked dragon,” the boy would cry, brandishing a blackthorn stick.

“Take care I don’t burn you to a crisp with my fiery breath, puny human,” his brother would roar, advancing in all his hugeness.

When dusk fell over the Magic Forest the tired but happy brothers would return to the cave for their favourite meal of mushrooms and milk and healing herbs. And the seasons turned, bringing new years.

One stormy night in the Magic Forest, when the dragon family were warm and dry in their cave, the parents called their sons to the ever-burning fire. Their anguish was plain in the flickering light as they spoke to their now-grown sons.

“It is time,” wept the wife to her dragon son. “Gaze into the flames and see your destiny. I turn my face for you must read it, not I.”

The puzzled young dragon stared into the glowing embers and saw the pictures flaring, hissing and sighing before his eyes. And his mind was filled with a terrible truth. Without a word to parent or brother he shambled out into the storm that raged through the Magic Forest. He did not look back.

“Equally loved son,” said the dragon, turning to the bewildered dragon boy, “now you must gaze into the fire and see your destiny. And when you turn and leave for ever, never turn your heart on us, your loving parents.”

Their son, now a sturdy young man, gazed into the fire as he was told. And there he saw the wicked King, his mother in desperate flight from the castle, her baby in her arms. He saw her fall, exhausted, in the Magic Forest, and a great anger swelled in him.

“Take these as your protection and your birthright,” said his father, his eyes filled with pain. “And if you can spare one life in your righteous quest, be a loving and forgiving brother.” Reaching out, he took from the glittering wall a bright, sharp sword and buckled it about his son. Reaching again, he took the cloak they had found their baby in. As the folds fell from their son’s shoulders, revealed was the blue-rose emblem adorning it. Squeezing his hands in tenderness, her clawed paws trembling, his weeping mother slipped the blue-rose ring on his finger. The duty they had feared to face was complete. The dragon parents had lost their sons. Cruel destiny had snatched them away.

“Like your brother, never look back,” they cried as their second son strode out of the cave into the storm-tossed Magic Forest.

The dragon boy paused in the Magic Forest. As the lightning flashed, he knelt at the grave of his mother under the blue-rose bush. Then he stood up and strode out of the trees and onto the plain beyond, his eyes looking up at the castle on the hill . . . the Blue-Rose Castle of his father, and of his fathers before. Drawing his bright, sharp sword he marched up the hill to avenge the death of his mother, and to take back that which was his by right. But his brave heart sank when he saw the keeper of the gate, the enemy who barred his way. Roaring fiercely and breathing fire was his dragon brother, acting out his own destiny, but with a heavy heart.

Brother gazed at beloved brother. Both remembered their childhood games. How could such close brothers forget those happy days in the sunny glades of the Magic Forest and kill each other? Could either brother slay the one he loved best in the world? The two brothers continued to stare at each other, their thoughts confused, their emotions torn.

“I command you, dragon, burn the usurper with your fiery breath,” cried the wicked, cowering King. “As my slave and keeper of my gate I order you to be rid of this impudent Prince for ever.”

“I cannot kill this one, for he’s my brother,” wailed the broken-hearted dragon.

“And I would sooner break my sword and die,” cried the Prince, weeping. “Oh, my brother, that destiny should bring us both to this.”

Back home in the cave their saddened parents gazed into the ever-burning fire. Then pictures began to flicker, images that brought great joy to their grieving hearts. Suddenly, there were their beloved sons advancing side by side to slay and scatter the wicked King and his court. Then, together as brothers, they entered the Blue-Rose Castle to the loud “Hurrahs” of the happy people. The Prince of the Blue-Rose was home.

“Thus let it be,” sighed the dragon parents in their warm cave in the Magic Forest. “The love of our sons has made a mockery of destiny. Now we can rest content.”

And the storm abated in the Magic Forest and the blue-rose bush grew strong to shed never-ending petals onto the grave of a lady who had not died in vain.