

## THE ENCHANTED ROCK

By John Patience

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THERE was once a dragon who flew down and settled upon an enchanted rock and was turned immediately to stone. The rain and the snow fell upon him, the wind lashed around him and the sun beat down upon his scaly head, but he never blinked an eyelid. One by one, the years passed, and a great city grew up around the stone dragon. The people of the city supposed that he was nothing more than a statue, but he watched everything that happened. He saw how unhappy the people were becoming. He listened to them talking, complaining that they had no money because King Skinflint taxed them so harshly that their children were starving and went without shoes. And if anyone had looked closely at the dragon, they would have seen tears welling up in his stone eyes and trickling down his cheeks, because inside his great stone body the dragon had a heart as soft as a marshmallow and he felt sorry for the poor people.

Then one morning, as the sun rose, a wisp of smoke curled up from the dragon's nostrils. Slowly, he moved his head from side to side, stretched out his wings and came alive again. A thousand years had passed and that's as long as even the strongest magic lasts. Now the dragon was free he decided that it was high time things were put right in the city, so he flew to King Skinflint's castle. The King was in his counting house, counting out his money when in flew the dragon. It gave him such a fright that he knocked over all his nice, neat piles of gold coins. "Help! I'm being attacked by a dragon," screamed the King. The door burst open and in rushed a group of guards, armed with swords and spears. "There's no need for all this," said the dragon. "I'm sure we can both be reasonable." "What do you mean?" said King Skinflint gruffly. "Explain yourself quickly. Time is money. That's one gold coin you've cost me already!" "Well, you know your subjects are all starving," explained the dragon. "I think you should stop taxing them. You have plenty of gold already—your counting house is full of it." "Don't be stupid!" shrieked the King, his eyes almost popping out of his head. "I need all the

gold I can get. Anyway, money is too good for poor people.” As he said this the King suddenly noticed that the dragon himself was covered from head to tail with beautiful, golden scales. “Seize the dragon!” yelled the King. “He’s worth a fortune!” Now of course the dragon could have easily flown away, but that would not have helped the poor people of the city. He could have roasted the soldiers and the King to a crisp with his fiery breath, but he was such a gentle creature that he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Instead, he allowed himself to be captured.

At first the King was at a loss to know what to do with the dragon. Though he was covered with gold scales you couldn’t exactly pile them up and count them, like gold coins. Then he had a wonderful idea: other kings rode around in golden carriages, but he would outshine them all by riding upon a golden dragon! And so it was. King Skinflint had a beautiful, jewelled saddle made for the dragon and flew upon him all around the city. There was only one little problem with all this as far as the King was concerned and that was that he was small and the dragon was tall. It was nothing really—it simply meant that someone had to give him a leg up when he mounted the dragon. As I say, nothing at all really.

King Skinflint could not have been happier. Though he could see wherever he went that his subjects were impoverished and sad, he didn’t mind a jot. In fact, he found it all very jolly and would often command the dragon to fly low so that he could make faces at people and shout rude remarks at them. From time-to-time King Skinflint would fly off to visit other kings, and they would always be green with envy. This made Skinflint happier than anything, because envy tasted just like cream on top of the strawberries to him.

All this time the dragon kept threatening to fly away, but the King promised that if he did then the people’s taxes would be promptly doubled. Then one morning, as the King was soaring around high up in the blue sky above the rooftops of the city, the dragon said, “King Skinflint, can you see what I see down there in the square by the rock where the stone dragon used to stand?” “No,” said the King, “I haven’t brought my glasses with me. What is it?”

“It’s something shiny,” replied the dragon. “I think it may be a gold coin.” “Are you sure?” cried the King, almost falling out of the saddle. Though his counting house was crammed with gold from floor to ceiling, still the thought of one more coin filled

him with excitement. “Oh, yes,” said the dragon. “I can see it very well now. But it doesn’t matter. I’m sure someone will find it and pick it up.” “Fool of a dragon!” bellowed King Skinflint. “Gold can’t be left lying around for any old beggar to pick up. Fly down so that I can get it myself. Quickly, before someone else sees it!”

So the dragon swooped down and landed in the square. “Well, where is it?” cried the King, leaping down from the dragon’s back and running around in circles. “Where is it?” “I’m sorry, your majesty,” said the dragon. “I must have been mistaken. Perhaps it was just a piece of broken glass catching the sunlight.” “Idiot!” roared the King. “Take me back to the palace at once. I wish to count my money again to cheer myself up.” “Very well, climb on my back,” said the dragon. The King looked around for someone to give him a leg up, but no one offered to help. Why should they? He had never helped them. “I’ll teach you all,” shouted King Skinflint. “I’ll triple your taxes tomorrow!” “Perhaps you could climb up on that rock,” suggested the dragon, “and hop on my back from there.” “Very well,” replied the King. He was not used to climbing but needs must, so, huffing and puffing, he struggled up the enchanted rock and, standing on top, he immediately turned to stone. He could not move a muscle, nor bat an eyelid, nor speak a word. “Don’t worry,” said the dragon. “The enchantment will wear off in a thousand years. That will give you lots of time to think about how greedy you have been.”

Then the dragon beat his great wings and rose up into the air. In a little while he was back in the King’s counting house. There he picked up a sack of gold and away he flew with it, down the city streets, showering down gold coins wherever he went. All day long he flew back and forth between the counting house and the city streets until at last all the King’s gold had been given back to the people. From that day on, no one was ever poor in the city again and, believe it or not, the dragon was made King!