

THE IMAGINARY DRAGON

By Terry Jones

© Terry Jones. Appears here with the kind permission of the Curtis Brown Group

A DRAGON was once taking afternoon tea with his friend the Gryphon. “What the devil’s the matter with you, Dragon?” exclaimed the Gryphon, who was never in the best of moods. “You look as if you’d swallowed a hedgehog!”

“I wish I had,” murmured the Dragon.

“Balderdash!” exclaimed the Gryphon. “Nobody could possibly want to swallow a hedgehog!”

“I might feel better than I do now,” said the Dragon.

“You make me cross!” exclaimed the Gryphon, who was always cross anyway. “I can’t stand you being miserable! It’s like sitting opposite a road accident!”

“Sorry!” said the Dragon.

“All right! All right!” said the Gryphon irritably. “You’d better tell me what’s wrong.”

“You’ll only laugh,” replied the Dragon.

“Of course I won’t,” grumbled the Gryphon, frowning even more than usual. “Scout’s honour!”

“Well...” said the Dragon cautiously, and he looked hard at the Gryphon with his old, sad eyes. “I think I may not exist.”

By the time the Gryphon had stopped laughing, the Dragon was on his way home, and the Gryphon had to run to catch his friend up.

“Come back, Dragon!” roared the Gryphon. “You can’t leave a perfectly good cup of tea half drunk!”

Now even though the Dragon had been looking so miserable, he had been enjoying that cup of tea, so he eventually allowed the Gryphon to persuade him to return to the tea table, and they carried on where they had left off.

“Where the devil did you get a tom-fool notion like that from?” asked the Gryphon in his gruff way.

“Well,” replied the Dragon. “I was reading this book that said dragons are mythological creatures—that is they are imaginary creatures that don’t actually exist!”

“Horse-feathers!” exclaimed the Gryphon. “You’re sitting here having tea with me! How could you possibly not exist?”

“Well,” said the Dragon slowly, “suppose that I were just a product of your imagination? You’re just imagining I’m sitting here having tea with you?”

“But...but...but...” stuttered the Gryphon, who was by this time was becoming even more irritated than normal. “I’ve never heard such arrant nonsense in my life!” And he punched the Dragon right on the nose.

“Ow!” exclaimed the Dragon, holding his nose, which is always the tenderest part of a dragon. “What did you do that for?”

“To prove to you that you are not the product of my imagination!” exclaimed the Gryphon. “If you were an imaginary creature you wouldn’t be able to feel anything when I punched you on the nose. You wouldn’t feel anything, see anything or hear anything!”

The Dragon looked at the Gryphon with his old, sad eyes, and thought for a long time—possibly a couple of hundred years—and then finally said:

“How do we know?”

“How do we know?! How do we know?!” exclaimed the Gryphon, whose tea had gone cold while he was waiting for the Dragon to reply. “What the devil are you wittering on about now, Dragon? How do we know what?”

“How do we know,” replied the Dragon, “that imaginary creatures—creatures that somebody has imagined and created—can’t feel and see and hear?”

“Well it’s obvious they can’t!” exclaimed the Gryphon. “If they’ve just been created out of thin air how could they possible feel or see or hear?”

“But everybody and everything has been created in one way or another...” replied the Dragon.

“BUT YOU’RE SITTING HERE TALKING TO ME!” exploded the Gryphon who by this time had had more than enough of this conversation.

The Dragon looked at him with his old, sad eyes and said:

“Ah! That’s the problem. How do we know that this whole event—me sitting here having tea with you—hasn’t been made up by somebody, who has then written it down on a bit of paper?”

“I can’t stand all this nonsense!” exclaimed the exasperated Gryphon. “Look! We’ll find somebody else, who will be able to confirm that we do exist!”

So they went to the Unicorn.

“Unicorn!” exclaimed the Gryphon in his gruff way, “Dragon here thinks he may not exist—that he may be just an imaginary creature that somebody dreamed-up! Tell him that he’s real!” But the Unicorn looked rather doubtful.

“Oh dear!” he said. “That’s serious! If Dragon isn’t real, perhaps none of us are!”

“Absolute piffle!” roared the Gryphon. “You’re all talking Twaddle! Bunkum and Tommyrot! I won’t listen to this drivel a moment longer!”

“Unicorn has a point,” said the Dragon.

“Very well,” grumbled the Gryphon, “we’ll go ask the Sphinx!”

“But you know the Sphinx’s answers often create more problems than the original question,” ventured the Unicorn.

“But sometimes,” said the Gryphon, “those new problems help you to solve the original problem.”

So the three friends went along to the Sphinx, and the Gryphon said: “Look here, Sphinx, my two friends have got some tom-fool notion in their heads that they don’t exist. They think they might be imaginary creatures that someone has dreamt up.”

“In fact,” said the Dragon, “this whole conversation may have been made up by somebody and written down on a bit of paper.”

“How can we be sure it isn’t?” asked the Unicorn. “How can we be sure that we exist?”

The three friends waited for the Sphinx to answer. But the Sphinx took his time—perhaps a couple of thousand years—before he finally opened his mouth, and a huge booming voice echoed over the desert sands.

The three friends trembled, as they heard the Sphinx’s words:

“Nothing exists,” said the Sphinx.

Well the three friends were so bemused by the Sphinx's answer they didn't know what to say. But they didn't want to prolong the conversation for another two thousand years, so they said:

"Thank you very much, Sphinx, very helpful." And walked back across the burning desert sands.

"Well that didn't get us anywhere!" exclaimed the Gryphon. "What a waste of two thousand years!"

"If nothing exists, then we certainly don't exist!" said the Unicorn dismally. "It's really most unsettling to think that we are all just imaginary characters in somebody else's story!"

"Yes!" agreed the Dragon. "It's even worse than I feared. It's not just me—*nothing* exists!"

The three friends walked on in the silence of Dreamland, until all at once the Dragon stopped and sat down.

"Wait a minute!" he cried. "I've just had a thought!" And then he started laughing and laughing.

Well of course the Gryphon got very annoyed.

"What the devil are you laughing at, Dragon?" he said.

"Yes!" exclaimed the Unicorn. "How can you laugh? If nothing exists and we are all just imaginary things—it's nothing to laugh about!" And the Unicorn and the Gryphon stared at the Dragon as if he were quite mad.

"But don't you see?" exclaimed the Dragon. "The Sphinx's answer solves the problem!"

"What the devil are you talking about?" growled the Gryphon.

"Yes!" said the Unicorn. "Explain yourself!"

"Well," said the Dragon, "it cannot be that nothing exists, as the Sphinx well knows, because if we were all imaginary creatures and this whole story were the product of somebody else's imagination—then at least we know for certain that imagination exists! And as long as imagination exists then we exist even if we're imaginary!"

And the three friends, the Dragon, the Gryphon and the Unicorn sat there in the vast plain of Dreamland, laughing and laughing, until the sun set, and they went home to dream their own dreams.