

# DRAGONS AT CRUMBLING CASTLE



In the days of King Arthur there were no newspapers, only town criers, who went around shouting the news at the tops of their voices.

King Arthur was sitting up in bed one Sunday, eating an egg, when the Sunday town crier trooped in. Actually, there were several of them: a man to draw the pictures, a jester for the

jokes and a small man in tights and football boots who was called the Sports Page.

# ‘DRAGONS INVADE CRUMBLING CASTLE,’

shouted the News Crier (this was the headline), and then he said in a softer voice, ‘**For full details hear page nine.**’

King Arthur dropped his spoon in amazement. **Dragons!** All the knights were out on quests, except for Sir Lancelot – and he had gone to France for his holidays.

The Ninth Page came panting up, coughed, and said: ‘Thousands flee for their lives as family

of green dragons burn and rampage around Crumbling Castle . . .’

‘What is King Arthur doing about this?’ demanded the Editorial Crier pompously. ‘What do we pay our taxes for? The people of Camelot demand action . . .’

‘Throw them out, and give them fourpence\* each,’ said the king to the butler. ‘Then call out the guard.’

Later that day he went out to the courtyard.

‘Now then, men,’ he said. ‘I want a volunteer . . .’ Then he adjusted his spectacles. The only other person in the courtyard was a small boy in a suit of mail much too big for him.

‘Ralph reporting, sire!’ the lad said, and saluted.

‘Where’s everyone else?’

‘Tom, John, Ron, Fred, Bill and Jack are off

\* In the days of King Arthur, this was a lot more money than it seems today – it would buy, oh, at least a cup of mead and a hunk of goat’s meat.



sick,' said Ralph, counting on his fingers. 'Then William, Bert, Joe and Albert are on holiday. James is visiting his granny. Rupert has gone hunting. And Eric . . .'

'Well then,' said the king. 'Ralph, how would you like to visit Crumbling Castle? Nice scenery, excellent food, only a few dragons to kill. Take my spare suit of armour – it's a bit roomy, but quite thick . . .'

So Ralph got on his donkey and trotted over the drawbridge, whistling, and disappeared over the hills. When he was out of sight he took off the armour and hid it behind a hedge, because it squeaked and was too hot, and put on his ordinary clothes.

High on a wooded hill sat a mounted figure in coal-black armour. He watched the young boy pass by, then galloped down after him on his big black horse.

TERRY PRATCHETT

# **'HALT IN THE NAME OF THE FRIDAY KNIGHT,'**



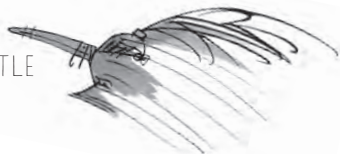
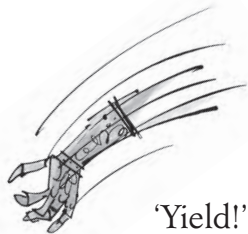
he cried in a deep voice, raising his black sword.

Ralph looked round. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said. 'Is this the right road to Crumbling Castle?'

'Well, yes, actually it is,' said the knight, looking rather embarrassed, and then he remembered that he was really a big bad knight, and continued in a hollow voice,

# **'BUT YOU'LL HAVE TO FIGHT ME FIRST!'**

Ralph looked up in amazement as the black knight got off his horse and charged at him, waving his sword.



'Yield!' the knight yelled, then he got his foot stuck in a rabbit hole and tripped over in a great clatter, like an explosion in a tin factory. Bits of armour flew everywhere.

There was silence for a moment, and then the helmet unscrewed itself and Ralph saw that the Friday knight himself was a very small man indeed. Or, at least, he had a very small head.

'Sorry,' said the knight. 'Can I try again?'

'**Certainly not!**' said Ralph, and unsheathed his rusty sword. 'I've won. You've fallen over first.\* It's not even Friday, so I shall call you Fortnight, 'cos I've fought you tonight. You're my prisoner!'

There was a great deal of clanking inside the armour, and then Fortnight climbed out through a trap door in the back. His ferocious black armour was three times as big as he was.

\* That's how it went in those days: the first knight to fall over lost the fight. I bet you all knew that.

So Ralph continued his journey to Crumbling Castle on his donkey, followed by Fortnight the Friday knight on his great black charger. After a while they became quite friendly, because Fortnight knew lots of jokes and could sing quite well. He'd belonged to a circus before he became a knight.

Next day they found a wizard sitting on a milestone, reading a book. He had the normal wizard's uniform: long white beard, pointed hat,\* a sort of nightdress covered in signs and spells, and long floppy boots, which he had taken off, revealing red socks.

'Excuse me, sir,' said Ralph, because you have to be careful when talking to wizards. 'Is this the way to Crumbling Castle?'

**'Thunder and lightning! Yes,'** said the wizard, closing his book with a

\* No self-respecting wizard would be seen in public without a pointy hat. But it could make going through low doorways a bit tricky, so they often developed bad knees in later life due to all that crouching down.





snap. 'Do you mind if I come too? I've got a few anti-dragon spells I'd like to try out.'

He said his name was Fossfiddle, and he was sitting by the road because his magic seven-league boots had broken down. He pointed to the pair of high brown boots by the milestone: magic boots are handy things – you can walk as far as you like in them without getting tired – but Fossfiddle's needed a bit of work on them.

So they gathered round, and since Fossfiddle knew a bit about magic and Fortnight knew a bit about boots and Ralph knew a bit about walking, they soon had the boots working again. Fossfiddle put them on and trotted along by Ralph's donkey.

The land around them grew grimmer and grimmer, and black mountains loomed up on either side. Grey clouds covered the sun, and a cold wind sprang up. The three of them plodded on, and

came to a cave hidden in a clump of thorn bushes.

‘We could do with a fire,’ said Ralph.



‘Nothing easier,’ said Fossfiddle. He muttered something, and produced a funny-looking glass bulb, a small hat, a banana and a brass candlestick.



It wasn't that he was a bad wizard: he just got things mixed up. And if he had but known it, the funny-looking bulb was several centuries ahead of itself.



After Fortnight had lit a fire they settled down around it and Ralph and Fossfiddle dozed off. But Fortnight thought he could hear something.

# Crack!

went a stick in the bushes. Something was creeping towards them.

Fortnight picked up his sword and crept towards the bushes. Something was moving in them;



something with very large feet. It was very dark, and somewhere an owl hooted.

**'YIELD!'**

yelled Fortnight, and dashed into the bushes. This woke up Ralph and Fossfiddle, who heard a great cracking and bashing about going on. So up they got and ran to Fortnight's help.

For five minutes there was no sound to be heard but swishings – and swear words when people trod on thorns. It was so dark nobody knew if anything was creeping up behind them, so they kept turning round and round just to make sure.

**'I'VE GOT IT!'**

shouted Fortnight, and jumped on something.

'Me!' came Fossfiddle's voice from the leaf-mould.

While all this was going on something very small crawled out of the bushes and began to warm





its feet by the fire. Then it rummaged through the rucksacks and ate Fossfiddle's breakfast for tomorrow.

'I heard something, I tell you,' muttered Fortnight, as the three of them came, scratched and bruised, out of the brambles. 'Look, there it is!'

**'It's a dragon!'** shouted Fossfiddle.

'It's a very weeny one . . .'

said Ralph. The dragon was about the size of a small kettle; it was green and had very large feet. It looked up at them, sniffed a bit, and began to cry.

'Perhaps my breakfast didn't agree with it,' muttered Fossfiddle, looking at his rucksack.

'Well, what shall we do with it?' said Ralph. 'It doesn't look very dangerous, I must say.'

'Has it lost its mummy then?' cooed Fortnight, getting down on his hands and knees and smiling at it. It backed away, and breathed some smoke at



him. Fortnight wasn't very good with children.

Finally they made it a bed in a big saucepan, put the lid on, and went back to sleep.

When they set off next morning Fossfiddle carried the saucepan on his back. After all, they couldn't just leave the dragon behind. After a while the lid opened, and the dragon stared out.

'This isn't dragon country,' said Ralph. 'I suppose it must have got lost.'

'It's the green variety. They grow to be thirty feet tall,' said Fortnight, 'and then they take to roaring and rampaging and walking on the grass and other lawlessness and wicked deeds.'

'What sort of deeds?' asked Ralph interestedly.

'Oh – well, I don't know. Leaving taps running and slamming doors, I suppose.'

That afternoon they came to Crumbling Castle.

It was on a high hill all by itself, and built of grey stone. In the valley below was a town, but most of it was burned down. There was no sign of anybody, not even a dragon.

They plucked up the courage to knock at the big black door. Fortnight's knees were knocking, and since he was wearing armour, this made a terrible din.





‘There’s no one in,’ he said quickly. ‘Let’s go back!’

The door wouldn’t open, so Fossfiddle got out his spell book.

‘Hopscotch alorum,  
Tremple dingotram-  
lines!’ he chanted. ‘Open!’



Instead the door turned into pink meringue. Fossfiddle always got things wrong.

‘My word, dashed tasty door that,’ said Fortnight, when they finally got through. They were in an empty courtyard. It seemed they were being watched. ‘I don’t like this much,’ he added, looking around and drawing his sword. ‘I get the feeling that something is going to jump out on us.’

‘That’s very nice, I must say,’ said Fossfiddle, whose nerves were not as good as they had been.

‘It’s all right,’ said Ralph. ‘Dragons are seldom bigger than the average house and not much hotter than the average furnace.’ He trod on Fossfiddle’s cloak as the wizard tried to run away. ‘So come back.’

Just then they met a dragon. It looked quite like the one asleep in the saucepan in Fossfiddle’s pack, except it was much **MUCH** bigger.

It crawled across the courtyard to them.

**‘Morning,’** it said.

Now this placed our heroes in a bit of a quandary, as you can see. You can’t go off and kill something that’s just said good morning to you.

‘Good morning,’ said Ralph, rather embarrassed.

‘I suppose we’ve come to the right place?’

**‘Yes, this is Crumbling Castle. I suppose you’ve come about all these people who’ve been bothering us.’**

‘First we’ve heard,’ said Ralph. ‘We heard that you dragons were bothering people. Where is everyone, anyway?’

The old dragon yawned. **‘Down at the dragon caves.’**

Then he explained it all to them. Dragons were really quite peaceful, and these had been living in some caves down by the river, bothering no one

except the fish, which they ate. But then the lord of the castle had built a dam downriver, and their caves had been flooded out.

So the dragons had come to live in the castle, scaring everyone else away. They had burned a few houses down, but they always checked that there was no one at home before they did so.

While the old dragon was talking, other dragons came from various parts of the castle and sat around listening.

**‘And now they’ve come and kidnapped the dragon prince,’** said the dragon.

‘Is he about twelve inches long, with large paws and a habit of biting?’ said Fossfiddle suspiciously. ‘Because if he is, we found him a few days ago. He’d just got lost.’ He held out the saucepan, and the little dragon hopped out.