

## THE STORY OF DRAGON EGGS

There is a magic land; far away, of course; maybe in another time warp. A castle on the hill is home base of the most powerful nation on the planet. The Head Dragon and his pals live in that castle.

When one of his soldiers was killed in battle—honorably, of course—his widow got sympathy from all her friends and neighbors, and a nice note from the Head Dragon, hand delivered by one of HD's Friends' son. A nice young man, but shy. The new widow took pity on his awkwardness, made him feel at home. She made him a nice meal and some hot chocolate. A rueful smile hovered around her still bleary eyes. "That's the last cup of chocolate I can make, young man. I saved it for my husband's home coming, but now..." and she burst out in tears again. The next morning the messenger, son of a Friend of the HD, mounted his horse and galloped back to the castle. He reported back to his father that the widow of this young soldier really had come on hard times, her husband grew the food she lived on, and now she would starve. He boldly suggested that perhaps they should allow the poor woman a small pension. The father, when he next saw the HD, mumbled something about giving pensions to war widows, "modest of course, but after all, fallen soldiers..." The Head Dragon liked the idea, *Great*, he bellowed, *That will remind them* ("them" meaning everyone outside the castle) *that we are a compassionate dragon, and we support our brave soldiers. And their wives. Widows. I mean, when they become widows. Well, you know what I mean.*

So, another Friend of the HD was given the job of determining how small a pension would make a good impression but still not strain the Treasure (dragons always guard treasure, that is what they do). That Friend of the HD got a committee together, and after a year there was a report. The HD did not read it (reading was not what had brought him to the throne) but asked yet another Friend to read it and advise him what action to take -- *if any*, he added emphatically. In due time the Friend (who had read the first few sentences of the report, but had an army of "observers," as he called them) -- this Friend, then, advised the HD that it might help the HD's reputation among "them" to allow a small pension to widows and perhaps even to soldiers who came home from the wars with serious situations that might make it difficult to provide for their families. *Situations, situations, what do you mean*, the HD yawned sleepily. Well, some soldiers come back without an arm, or maybe they lost both legs. *Yeah*, the Head Dragon mumbled, *that would make walking awkward*. Awkward is right, the Friend nodded. *But-- and the HD woke up a little -- but whose fault is it that the man was stupid enough to lose both legs? Eh, answer me that!*

Eventually, however, the Friend who had all those observers in the field went to the HD and they finally agreed on a small pension. Emphasis on small. The amount to be determined by this Friend and the Friend who had the keys to the Treasure.

But first of all the various Friends closest to the HD had to come up with how much of WHAT these pensions would be. Now, among the Friends there were some brilliant wizards. The most brilliant of them, who happened to be married to the sister (half-sister, to be ruthlessly honest) of the HD, came up with "dragon eggs." Endless discussion among the Friends, of course. Dragons don't lay eggs. Worse, there weren't any real dragons, that was only a sort of title the Head Dragon had assumed. Never mind, never mind. To "them" dragons are real, and to be awarded, say, a regular gift from the Head Dragon of three dragon eggs every new moon, would make a great impression on "them." And so dragon eggs were designed on little slips of paper. Over time the need was felt to think of other numbers: seven dragon eggs made a dragon feather. And thirteen dragon feathers made a dragon skin. Then the Friends decided they should also get some kind of remuneration for all the work they were doing to help

war widows and soldiers in *situations*. Then it was necessary to pay Friends of the HD in dragon coats and dragon legs, dragon eyes. A dragon eye was an unthinkable quantity of dragon egg, so many that nobody quite knew what to do with it. And all the time “dragon eggs” were pieces of colored paper. Every denomination a different shape and color.

All this had taken several years to work out, of course. Then came the problem of finding widows and the wounded soldier who would get the dragon eggs. Yet another Friend of the HD was given the task of sending his men out to count everyone in the kingdom (dragondom?). That took many more years. But finally a list came into being, kept in the Castle, of course. The HD had long forgotten the original widow who had started the whole thing, but one of his true Friends reminded him, Would it not be nice to begin this wonderful project by asking the poor widow to the Castle, have the press there and... *Great idea*, the HD bellowed. *And why not let the son of whatever his name is go there to invite her. And accompany her.*

Well, it so happened that the son had been so smitten with the widow, that not long after he came back to the castle he found an excuse to visit her again. And again. The widow bore him a child, a daughter, so Son married Widow. His father gave him a large chunk of land with a nice house on it that Son would have inherited anyway, eventually. Now, all those years later, they had five children, a large and prosperous farm.

The committee of Friends of the HD decided they would invite the couple anyway. It was, of course, not necessary to tell the HD all the facts about the poor widow, who technically was no longer a widow and certainly did not need the few dragon eggs she was allotted. The couple had a good baby sitter for the children, —none of them babies any more, of course — in the ex-widow’s mother who had come to live with them a year earlier when her husband died of old age. There was an important Overseer for the land which had forests and meadows, large gardens and by now a few smaller houses.

Ceremonies were colorful and endless, and loud. The Head Dragon was so moved by his own generosity that he decided, on the spur of the moment, to make the young man who had “accompanied the widow” a Friend, with a high position in the Castle.

The ex-widow embarrassed the many Friends who had worked so hard to bring this all about when she asked, What should I do with this handful of paper?

Buy food, one Friend said. Buy a horse, perhaps. Or some clothes. Maybe seeds to plant and grow to have enough food to eat.

She had no need for any of those things, of course, started to say something, but her husband quickly spoke up, Or, we could save some, for later.

Excellent idea, the Friends said in chorus. In fact, such an excellent idea that if you leave it with us, for a while, we will add a little something to make it interesting. Yes, another Friend said, If you leave it with us we will pay you interest: a percentage of what you leave with us.

And so it was done.

At first only a few of the They did use dragon eggs to buy food, or horses, land, and even saved. But soon the little pieces of paper named dragon eggs became a medium of exchange. Neighbors did not help each other, but now must be paid to help. Tomatoes and pigs were no longer exchanged, now there was at least one middle person who bought tomatoes from the tomato grower, selling them to the pig grower. The middle man had to have a helper, who of course also had to be paid in dragon eggs. In a very short time the middle people became the important ones. A whole new class of people was born, people who did not grow anything, or made anything, or even taught anything, but all they did was buy and sell. It took a certain kind of smart to

accumulate lots of dragon eggs, a big house, servants, horses and a fancy wagon to pay visits to Castle City, where they paid other middle people to change the rules just a bit to their advantage.

The Head Dragon died; another Head Dragon took his place. By that time dragon eggs and other dragon parts had become a necessary and essential part of the Dragondom, the most powerful nation on that earth. Also the richest, of course.

Until one day a grandson of the ex-widow and the Son of a Friend, spoke up at a meeting of the They. He was a smart boy, young, perhaps sixteen (the They did not keep track of birth dates), but wise for his age. He held up a piece of paper worth 27 dragon eggs. *What is this?* he asked. *Dragon eggs*, someone said. *It is value*, someone else added, *for that you could almost buy a horse*. A third person said, *Or a good winter coat*.

No, the grandson said, it is just a piece of paper.

Loud protests from all those present. *But we get paid; we pay taxes in dragon eggs; we buy things with it; I'm still paying DEs for my mortgage; it bought me a trip to wonderland*.

But, it must be said, doubt had been sown. Very few people understood the whole idea, but almost everyone knew what you could do with dragon eggs. DEs had become essential elements in their world. They would not be able to survive without DEs. How else to buy anything? At that time they called them DE.

*But*, the grandson said, *What is buying? I know that two farms from ours the man breeds horses. If I needed a horse I would go to him and choose a horse and ask the man what I could do for him in return*.

*What could you do for a horse?* a woman asked.

Many people had suggestions, One man had too many tomatoes, and tomatoes don't travel very well, *You can have my tomatoes*, he yelled, *if you help paint my house!* Someone else had some trees that he wanted cut, *Good wood for burning*, he said. A young woman had embroidered some napkins she wanted to give in exchange for a new outfit. Until finally the oldest of the They stood up. The yelling stopped, everyone calmed down, and waited for the wise elder to speak.

*That is how it was before dragon eggs*, he said. *We helped each other, we knew each other and knew how we could help, or else someone would ask for help. Doing good deeds is infectious. When I help you -- and he looked at a beautiful woman -- you feel like helping someone else. And so it goes around, and maybe the nation will be a more pleasant place to live*.

There was a long silence when people thought about those old, but now new, ideas. *But, what then about dragon eggs?*

A tall man who had a wagon and made frequent trips to the city where the Castle is, spoke up: *As you know I go every half moon to the city to take the tomatoes and embroidery you make here to the city, where I sell it for dragon eggs. I am helping you and of course helping myself a bit. Perhaps even helping the women in the city who need tomatoes or beautifully embroidered napkins*.

*Because city people are rich*, a girl interrupted.

*No, not all people are rich*, said the man with the wagon. *Yes, there are rich people there; **very** rich. But many people are poor, very poor! It is the poor who don't have enough dragon eggs to buy the food and shelter they desperately need*.

*Don't they have skills, or don't they grow things they can exchange?*

*Probably they do, but in the city you need dragon eggs*.

The discussion fizzled. The They who lived on and from the land had a hard time understanding how so many people in the city could be so needy, when there were

others who were rich in dragon eggs, that they kept and never gave away, of course. True, there were useful things to be had (bought) in the city, like buttons, wool (nobody in the village kept sheep), even exotic things like cotton in large sheets, shoes with rubber soles and those things had to be paid for in dragon eggs, of course. Then, one day the wagon man came back from the city with his beard gone and his hair so short that his neck shined pink like a baby's. What happened? This is the new way in the city. Men do not grow their hair long any more, they go to a specialist in hair. Barber, they call it. And how many DE did you pay for that? Oh, plenty, The man I went to has a thriving business, five people work for him. And, the wagon man added, on top of the fee you are also supposed to pay a tip. What is a tip, a teen asked, The wagon man tried to explain. You see, it's like this. I went to this barber that had been recommended to me. There are six chairs, five of them had someone sitting in them. Not regular chairs, but chairs that can swivel around and lean back, that have a foot rest. And five barbers were cutting hair of five people. I had to wait. There was also a woman who sat on a high chair behind a counter, and she collected the dregs — yes, in the city dragon eggs are now called *dregs*. So, when my turn came, I sat in a chair and the barber shook his head and said, This is a big, big job; but he grinned. Have to charge you. Yes I knew that, of course, but the barber explained that the first time is always a big big job and I would have to pay many dregs. After the first time it is only 4 dregs when you come for a trim. Say, every two weeks. And if you like my work, the barber said, you also tip me. I gave him a little shove. No, no, not that kind of tip, you give me an extra dreg, just for me, not for the people who run this place. Later, wagon man whispered, I learned that tipping is not easy, you have to quickly calculate in your head one seventh of the price you pay.

The teen shook her head. Makes no sense to me. I would not let anyone else fuss over my hair, and she shook her mane of beautiful dark wavy hair over her shoulder except of course my ma. She knows how to make it look good. And anyway I don't like men without beards. How can you tell they are men, not boys?

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Over the years, centuries, everybody learned about dragon eggs from almost the first day of life. There was nothing that did not require the exchange of dregs as they were known now. So many dregs made a drog, twelve drogs was a drig, counting ten fingers ten times was a drug, and after that the numbers became so big that they were drips, drops, drups, and so on. Any and every transaction cost dregs, people were paid in dregs, travel and import were paid in dregs. Other lands had different names for what they had. One of the neighboring lands had round disks, they called flaps. For a long time one dreg was one flap. But then, for reasons nobody could explain, suddenly you could exchange one dreg for one and a half flap. Another neighboring land had shapes cast in bronze; beautiful little objects, but they weighed down pockets and purses, so they adopted bronze and silver flat round, triangular and rectangular pieces that were called bra, bre, bri, bro, and bru. One dreg was not enough to even get a bra, you had to have two and a quarter dreg to exchange for one bra.

Humans get used to anything. It did not take long before people could not even imagine a world without dregs, or flaps, or bras, or whatever strange people called their current —the new word for the concept of things that have an imaginary value, Soon the universities established Chairs in *currentology*, and girls and boys got advanced degrees in the theory of *currents*. Much effort went into how current was related to well-being, to properties; first real properties, then surreal properties. This story is a surreal

property, which means that only I can tell this story, anyone who steals the story has to pay me at least a dreg, and probably both of us have to share the cost of going to court.

I must confess that the idea of a something that is not anything real but is said to help trading, I can understand, Sort of. But when it comes to the value of imaginary concepts twice removed, I am lost. I sort of understand the concept of interest — in some modern countries where the religion forbids charging interest, they call it rent: if I have some dregs that are lying around and I don't need them, I can bring them to a bank, and they will give me back a little more after a year, because in the meantime the bank has loaned my dregs to a business that needed some quick dregs, and paid the bank for the privilege of using my dregs for a month or even overnight. They have computers that do all of that. It is like rent, if I use something for a while but don't own the gadget I need to do that, I rent it from someone who has no need for it at the moment. If the bank needs some dregs to loan to another bank, they can use my money and pay me rent. But now the currentologists have come up with new ideas for making profit out of imaginary concepts, and for reasons I do not understand the profit is real although what was traded was not. This is how it was explained to me. Currentology wizards have figured out ways to make profit from the amounts of dregs people do *not* have. Those amounts that do not exist yet, and perhaps never will, are broken up in pieces, and the pieces combined in documents that are then sold for dregs, or drigs, or even drogs. Then the value of those documents is determined by someone who does not know anything about who the people are whose no-dregs were split and put into documents with other people's no-dregs. Seems obvious that now we really do not know any more what things are worth. if anything. But I do know that the consequence of this new invention in the currents of this and other lands, is an awful lot of poor people. We are told that this is what it was about in the first place: the current must flow *up*. The rich deserve more riches, and hocus pocus abracadabra zap, overnight they are now twice as rich as they were yesterday.

People talk currentology. Everyone has heard some expert say that the new values are because of this, or because of that, the weather, the long distances someone has to go to get grain, or the computers need to be reprogrammed. But despite all those different theories, I still do not understand why bread costs more every time I buy it.

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A whole world went from growing and occasionally hunting to the imaginary value of dragon eggs. What is going to happen to this world when dragon eggs don't have any value any more? Nothing works any more. We have come to rely on machines for everything we do, for moving around, for moving stuff around, for entertainment. Oh, yes, that has become another whole science, with dozens of branches and specialties, specialists, large groups of people who design ways to present a product or a service to appeal, so that people will want to spend good dregs for new and better, In fact it is not always better, of course, but by the time that has been accepted eleven new things have appeared in the current. And each new thing requires not only plenty of dregs but almost always a new profession, new specialists, all of whom have to be paid a lot of dregs.

What to do with yesterday's newest has become a major problem in this new world of dregs. Another major change is the rapidly increasing number of specialists for new things to specialize in. How to value a service there never was a need for before?

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We don't have Head Dragons any more, of course. That is too old-fashioned. Now we have leaders, some appointed by us, others appointed by themselves, or the local army. Often people who aspire to become leaders (think *power*) pay many dregs for the privilege of making war in order to get their hands on the flaps and flops of another land. It is all very complicated, because it is we at the bottom who somehow have to pay our dregs for the machines, the many levels of people all of whom have to be paid in dregs. We pay the leaders and their Friends and companions and assistants, and the assistants of assistants, secretaries and their secretaries. Wars are expensive, but lucrative for some. Yet another way to move the current upward.

This whole thing about dragon eggs has gotten out of hand. Many of our ideas about how to organize ourselves according to this or that theory are getting too complicated. Everything we do seems to be so complicated that it does not work well anymore. What we make does not last, and of course what we make does not grow or heal itself. It could be repaired perhaps but we are much too busy inventing new machines. Throw the old ones away. But where?

Now we have come to a time when for many reasons dregs are not worth what they were, but the leader can print as many dregs as he needs. We, at the bottom, eat less and cannot move around much any more, because we cannot get our minds out of the sphere of dregs and drogs and drags and drugs and drigs. The people at the top are fat with all the different kinds of dregs and drags and such. The dregs they have in a bank are probably not worth much any more, but they have houses and air planes and servants, many of them armed to the teeth. They think they own the world.

The people at the bottom are getting fat from eating bad food, or, if they eat real food they get thinner. Don't you wish we could forget about dragon eggs altogether? I know a neighbor who has a cow; we have lots of chickens. I could exchange some eggs for a liter of milk. My son is a great wood chopper, he can make me some small sticks to burn in my newly invented cooker (for outdoors, of course), and in return I can wash the windows of his house. We don't need dragon eggs in a tight community.

Do we even need dragons?