

dragon's rock

'a nightmarish chiller which blends the
flavour of Twin Peaks with Alan Garner'

Times Educational Supplement



Tim Bowler

winner of the Carnegie Medal

Dragon's Rock



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1

That day it came for him again.

He remembered leaning back and resting, and rocking to the motion of the train. And closing his eyes.

The next moment it was upon him, racing like an angry fire through the landscape of his sleep. He ran, gasping for air in the stifling heat of its breath, but it was no good. He was already starting to weaken, starting to give up. And he could feel it drawing closer, closer, roaring its fury after him. Any moment now it would appear, any moment now he would have to face it and suffer for the wrong he sensed he had done it. Any moment now he would—

‘The next station will be Exeter St Davids. Exeter St Davids the next station. Thank you.’

He blinked his eyes open, unsure for a moment whether he was still dreaming.

But there was no dragon before him. Only a man watching him over the top of his newspaper.

‘Are you all right, lad?’

‘What . . . what do—?’

‘You were moaning while you were asleep.’

He looked out of the window at the fields rushing past.

‘I’m all right, it’s just . . . just—’

‘A bad dream maybe.’

‘Yes,’ he said quickly. ‘A bad dream. And something . . .’

He stared over the wintry land as far as the horizon.

Something I’ve got to put right.

He closed his eyes once more, but this time resisted sleep. Sleep had become a place of fear, a place where the dragon hunted him; and so it had been since that first fateful visit

six years ago. But now he had a chance, to go back and put things right, and start to live again. And perhaps then the dragon would let him be.

He opened his eyes again, ignored the man's quizzical glance and looked up at the sky, and for a while found his mind drifting away from the dragon. To the farm, the fields, the forest, his nervousness about seeing Toby again; but most of all to the things that had haunted him since that visit. The things he had seen but would never forget.

And one in particular, though he'd glimpsed it for but a second.

The face of a frightened woman.

The knife flashed and Toby smiled as he often did when he was whittling and found he'd poked his tongue out. But then whittling needs concentration, he decided, and you can't concentrate without poking your tongue out.

Chip, chip, chip.

The bits flew down on the grass, and he smiled again. There was always something reassuring about the feel of wood. He glanced at the sheep-dog curled at his feet.

Feigning sleep probably but he knew Flash would only need a sniff of action to be up and bounding. For a moment he stopped whittling and watched the slow movement of the stomach, in and out, regular and relaxed, as though nothing were really wrong after all. As if to remind him of reality, he heard his father call.

'Toby!'

He looked over his shoulder towards the paddock fence.

'Here!'

'What are you doing?'

'Whittling.'

'Is Flash with you?'

He wished Dad wouldn't keep asking, even if it was for the best of reasons.

'Yes!'

He heard his father thrust something into the shed, then close the door and clip the latch. A moment later he appeared round the corner, his arms bare despite the December chill.

'Good, I thought he might have . . . you know—'

'He's been with me for the last hour.'

As though sensing they were talking about him, Flash rolled over on his back, looking from one to the other. Dad bent down and ran his hand through the fur.

'You think I'm being over-cautious, don't you? But you know what he's like for running off.' He nodded towards the western fields. 'Specially that way. We can't take any chances. I saw her on our land again this morning when I was out. She was watching him.'

'Gordon saw her yesterday.'

'So we've got to be careful. You ready?'

'Suppose so.'

'Come on, it won't be that bad and you promised you'd try. We'd better get going. We don't want to be late.'

Yes, we do, Toby thought, but he followed Dad through the gate and down the muddy path to the house.

'Do it for your mum and me,' Dad said, stopping by the door. 'I mean, you wouldn't like it if you were stuck at a boarding-school in England while we were away in Hong Kong. You wouldn't want to spend Christmas on your own.'

'But you said they'd have paid for him to go out to Hong Kong for Christmas.'

'They gave him the choice. Said if he wanted, they'd pay for him to fly out, otherwise he could stay with us since we'd offered to put him up.'

'So why isn't he going out there?'

'Because he particularly wanted to come here. He said so.'

'But why?'

'I don't know.' Dad looked at him tetchily. 'Look, we've been through all this.'

Mum's face appeared round the door.

'Where's Flash? Is he with you?'

As though in reply the dog bounded into the house and through to the kitchen. Dad watched for a moment, then reached inside the door for his coat.

'Right, Toby.'

Totnes Station had a deserted air. Toby looked up and down the platforms but apart from Dad and himself, there was no one to be seen. The little café was shut, the waiting-room was empty, there were no sounds of movement or voices; it might have been a ghost station, waiting for a spectral train that would never come.

He frowned.

This train would come.

He looked down the track and to his relief saw no sign of it. A pied wagtail flitted over the station fence and ran along the track for a few yards before flying off again. He pulled his coat collar up and burrowed his chin deeper.

'Half-past three,' said Dad. 'Train's late.'

Toby glanced up and saw the sky already darkening. Let it be late, he thought, let it never come, let it go somewhere else. Then he heard the tinkling in the rails.

He cocked his head to one side and listened, wondering whether Dad had heard it too. A door banged behind them and a station official strode past them to the edge of the platform.

'Nother cold day,' said Dad.

The man peered down the line for a few seconds, but eventually managed a nod.

'We'll have a white Christmas yet.'

There was the train; he could see it now, a huge, hateful serpent snaking its way towards them until finally the engine and the first of the carriages swept past the platform. He glared at it, wishing it would rattle on to Plymouth without stopping.

But it slowly came to a halt; and now all he could pray for was that no one would get off. But that was certainly too much to hope.

Dad started forward.

'There he is.'

A door had opened and a small figure was climbing down.

Toby stared, trying to remember the picture in his mind of six years ago. The hair was longer, but it was still the same revolting blond, and even from here he could see the pale, unhealthy-looking skin. And the glasses were even more ridiculous than the last ones he had.

Dad hustled ahead.

'Benjamin! Welcome! Toby, get that suitcase.'

Toby was still studying Benjamin and he found he liked what he saw even less than last time. He's still got that funny way of looking past you, he thought, not meeting your eyes properly, and—

'Toby! Suitcase!'

Benjamin's lip quivered.

'It's all right, I can—'

Toby reached up and took the suitcase.

'No problem.'

'Thank you,' said Benjamin.

They set off down the platform, Toby hanging back slightly and watching with amusement as Benjamin struggled to keep up with Dad's vigorous pace.

'How's boarding-school?' he heard Dad say.

'Not very nice. Did . . . did you have to wait long?'

'Couple of minutes.'

'Ten!' Toby called.

He ignored the backward glance from his father and continued to study Benjamin.

It was pathetic.

He was out of breath already, panting and gasping like on a cross-country run, and he wasn't even carrying his suitcase. The prospect of Christmas and two weeks of Benjamin looked bleaker than ever.

They had reached the exit now and, as Toby expected, there was an interminable wait while Benjamin looked for his ticket, first trying this pocket, then that, before eventually finding it stuffed inside his handkerchief. But at last they were out of the station and heading up the road.

Even that was too good to be true. They hadn't gone ten yards before Benjamin stopped.

'Haven't you got . . . ?'

Dad looked round.

'Something wrong?'

'I just thought . . . maybe you'd have a car with you.'

Toby rolled his eyes. Fifteen miles from home and he thinks we're travelling on foot; this is going to be even worse than last time. Dad nodded up the road.

'We've got a car. See?'

'Isn't that a Land Rover?'

Toby saw the first sign of frustration on Dad's face, but the voice resolutely betrayed none of it.

'That's right, a Land Rover. Seen better days too, but it'll get us home. Right, Toby?'

'Nothing posh in our family.'

'Of course not.' Benjamin nodded quickly, as though anxious to show agreement.

Dad walked over to the driver's door and started to unlock it. Benjamin turned to Toby.

'Your father—'

'What about him?'

'He . . . he looks different.'

'Lost some hair probably.'

Benjamin's eyes slanted away towards the sky.

'He was nice to me last time. He gave me a ride on the tractor.'

Toby looked at the face before him, the wispy curls of hair blowing girlishly round it, and wondered what he'd done to deserve seeing this every day for the next two weeks. It certainly hadn't improved with time, he decided;

it was still a baby-face, a weak face, a nothing face. A face he could do without.

He ran ahead, pulled open the side door of the Land Rover and climbed in, dragging the suitcase after him. Dad was already in the driver's seat.

'Toby, push that case to the side, can you? Benjamin can't get in. And squeeze up.'

'I can go in the back.'

'Not with all the fencing stuff, you can't.'

'I can! I can climb over the top.'

'Do as you're told.'

He moved reluctantly to the right and pulled the suitcase away from the opening. Dad leaned across him.

'Right, Benjamin, jump in.'

Some jump, Toby thought, watching Benjamin cautiously lift one leg in, slide his body after it until he was sitting almost hunched up on the seat, then with equal caution lift the other leg in and close the door. Dad started the engine, swung the Land Rover round and they headed off up the road.

The sky had darkened further and as they pulled out of Totnes, Toby leant back and gazed upwards at the dusky islands of cloud, listening uninterestedly to Dad's attempts at conversation; asking Benjamin about the journey, why he didn't like school, how his parents would manage Christmas without him.

They're lucky, Toby thought. They're probably glad they haven't got him. And we're stuck with him instead.

The fields were soon racing past and Totnes behind them. It was good to be heading home to a warm house, even if they did have an unwanted guest with them. Dad seemed finally to have run out of questions, and since Benjamin asked none of his own, the journey was becoming slightly more bearable. At last they were off the main road and cutting along the old familiar lane towards the farm.

Dad, looking more and more at ease the closer they drew to home, caught Benjamin's eye and nodded out of the

window. 'See that line of poplars, Benjamin?'

Benjamin stared blankly ahead and Toby chuckled. But Dad heard.

'No need for that, Toby. We weren't all born in the country.' He pointed over the field. 'See those trees, Benjamin?'

Benjamin nodded.

'They're called poplars. Now just beyond, you should see some buildings. Got them?'

'Yes, sir.'

'S all right, none of that "sir" rubbish. I don't get any airs and graces from Toby, so I don't expect any from you. Anyway, see the buildings?'

'Yes.'

'That's the farm next to ours.'

'The one with the geese?'

'You've got a good memory after six years. What else can you remember?'

Toby saw the lips quiver again in that annoying way.

'I remember lots of things,' said Benjamin. 'Lots of things. I . . .'

The pallid eyes assumed an inward look and Benjamin's voice trailed away as though it had never been.

Toby stared. This boy was weird; even weirder than last time. They drove on in silence and he found himself thinking about Flash again, wishing he'd locked the dog up before leaving. But perhaps Mum had him indoors, or Gordon was with him, or—

He leaned forward, impatient to get home and make sure all was well. Dad pointed again.

'Remember that, Benjamin?'

Benjamin squinted out of the window.

'The oak tree?'

'There you are, Toby, he does know a bit about trees.'

Benjamin took off his glasses and wiped them nervously.

'I only remember the oak tree because you told me about it last time I came.'

'Did I?'

'Yes. You were standing by it, and you were wearing a dark blue pullover—a big woolly one—with a funny pattern—'

'The things you remember.'

'—And you told me it's the old oak that guards the house whenever you're away.'

'Did I say that?'

'Yes. You had a hat on, too, a funny flat one.'

'I can't let you stay with us if you're going to be rude about what I wear.'

Benjamin flushed.

'I . . . I didn't mean to—'

Dad winked at him.

'I'm only pulling your leg. You can make as many jokes as you want about my appearance. Everyone else does.'

Benjamin carefully replaced his glasses and seemed on the point of answering; then, without a word, he turned suddenly and stared out over the field. Toby watched and frowned, wondering what could possibly have attracted Benjamin's attention out there. Probably nothing at all, he decided, or nothing of any interest. But he noticed that Benjamin had started almost imperceptibly to shake.

He ignored Benjamin and looked about him; there was something far more important to think about and he wouldn't be happy until he was home and everything was all right. They were through the farm entrance now and bumping along past the orchard towards the house; too early to feel anxiety, he knew, but he felt it just the same and wished Dad would drive faster. They entered the yard, pulled up outside the door and Dad switched off the engine.

And Toby's anxiety grew.

Inevitably Benjamin was taking his time getting out.

'Come on,' said Toby. 'We haven't got all day.'

'Give him a chance,' said Dad. 'And don't forget to take his case in.'

Benjamin climbed clumsily out. Dad laughed.

'Don't worry about Toby. He's always a man in a hurry. He's probably forgotten to make your bed or something.'

Toby was already out of the Land Rover and running towards the house.

'Toby!' Dad called after him. 'Suitcase!'

Toby whirled round and saw Benjamin smiling shyly at him.

'I can . . . get it.'

'No bother,' he said huffily, ran back and grabbed the case, and raced towards the house so fast that he almost barged into Mum coming out.

'Careful, Toby,' she said and quickly stepped past him. 'Now, where is he, where is he? Benjamin!'

Toby stopped to look, despite his impatience, and immediately wished he hadn't. Benjamin was gazing up at her, a simpering smile round his lips, and she was smiling back, her arm round his shoulder as though she actually liked him.

'It's lovely to see you again,' she said. 'We've been so looking forward to having you with us for Christmas. Six years has been too long.'

She drew him towards the house, her arm still round his shoulder.

'We'll have lots to talk about and lots of things for you to do.'

Toby recognized the tone of her voice: it was the one she used when she spoke to animals or little children; which seemed appropriate here, he thought grimly. Anyway, Benjamin was obviously enjoying it. But this wasn't the time to stand around.

He dashed into the house. From the oven came the tempting smell of baking bread and he saw three loaves already on the kitchen table, each one prickly with sunflower seeds. The clock in the hall chimed reassuringly. Everything seemed normal.

But everything was not normal. He knew that. He

dropped the suitcase, ran to the window and scanned the yard, listening intently. Behind him he heard Mum and Benjamin come in.

'You remember Gordon?' she was saying. 'Toby's brother?'

'Yes, he's got a big brown coat.'

She laughed.

'Well, he did have. Anyway, he's nineteen now. He works on the farm with us. He should be around somewhere.'

Gordon! Toby stroked his chin. Maybe that was it. Then he heard Dad call from outside.

'Has anyone seen . . . ?'

But his father's voice died away. And as it did so, Toby saw the bulky figure of his brother at the far end of the paddock, walking towards the house.

Carrying something in his arms.

2

Toby sat on the paddock fence, kicking his legs back and forth, glad the darkness had come. He hated crying; it made him feel he was weak and childish, like Benjamin.

Benjamin. Stupid Benjamin. He could imagine Benjamin crying; he almost wanted to see Benjamin crying. He heard footsteps behind him but didn't need to turn to see who it was.

'Come inside, Toby,' said Dad. 'You've got to eat.'

He ran his eyes over the silver birch, its trunk shiny in the moonlight. Dad touched his shoulder.

'Let's have a walk at least.'

He climbed off the fence and followed Dad away from the house, and they walked in silence for a few minutes. The evening air was growing colder. Dad stopped to light his pipe, eyeing Toby over the flame of the match.

'I know how you feel. It's tough losing a dog. It's like losing a friend.' He shook the match and blew out a cloud of smoke. 'Reminds me of old Socks.'

'Socks?'

'Didn't I tell you about Socks? He was my dog when I was a kid. Sheep-dog, same as Flash. Bit bigger maybe. I lost him when I was fourteen.'

'Why Socks?'

'Can't you guess? He had these funny white bits at the bottom of his legs, like a pair of socks.'

'Two pairs for a dog.'

'Right. Two pairs.'

'Did he die the same way as Flash?'

'In a trap? No, thank God, least I hope not. I don't really

know how he died. There were some gypsies camping near the farm and they took a fancy to him. When they moved on, he moved on too.'

'Did you see them take him?'

Dad thumbed his pipe.

'Not as such but I always reckoned he went with 'em. He was just like Flash, too sociable for his own good.'

Toby looked down.

'But we know who did this.'

'Maybe we do, but we can't prove anything.'

'We can. It could only be her. Gordon said it wasn't a normal trap, it was some horrible thing cobbled together, and if it hadn't been so huge, it probably wouldn't have killed Flash outright when he—' he shuddered, '—when he put his nose in to sniff it. And Gordon saw her standing over it. How much more proof do you need?'

Dad shook his head.

'Technically, the police could say she was just looking. And there's no hard evidence. The trap's gone, Gordon said. He's just been back to look for it.'

'Cause she took it, that's why. To cover up. You know it's her.'

Dad turned back towards the house.

'It still won't stand up as proof. Come on, let's join the others. We've got a guest to look after.'

Toby felt his fists tighten.

Supper should have been a joyous event: his favourite rolls, crusty brown and speckled, and a tantalizing smell of herbs and vegetables from the soup in the tureen. And Christmas to look forward to.

But there was no joy tonight. And for some reason, despite the fire, the room felt curiously chill.

The others took their normal places, Dad at the head, Mum at the foot, and Gordon opposite. To his annoyance, he saw a place laid to his left.

‘We’re putting you there, Benjamin,’ said Mum. ‘Next to Toby.’

‘Thank you,’ said Benjamin.

‘So you can give Toby a kick,’ said Gordon, ‘when he slurps his soup.’

‘Very funny,’ said Toby.

He glanced at Benjamin and to his surprise saw he had his eyes closed. He looked at Mum.

‘What’s he doing? Praying or something?’

‘Ssh!’ Mum put a finger to her lips, and quietly reached for the tureen. At the sound of the lid moving, Benjamin’s eyes opened.

‘Oh.’ He looked startled. ‘We’ve . . . we’ve started.’

‘No, we haven’t,’ said Mum. ‘Pass me your bowl.’

Benjamin studied it for a moment before holding it out.

‘You had these last time. I remember the pattern.’

‘That’s right.’ She filled the bowl and handed it back.

‘Not as many though. We’ve broken a few since then.’

‘He’s got a good memory,’ said Dad. ‘Remembers all kinds of things.’

Gordon held out his bowl.

‘Shame he’s not staying during school time. He could help Toby with his homework. When Toby does homework, that is. Thanks, Mum.’

Toby ignored the leg pull and turned to Benjamin.

‘What were you doing just now?’ he said bluntly.

Benjamin’s lip trembled again.

‘What—?’

‘You had your eyes closed. What were you doing?’

Mum touched him on the arm.

‘Let Benjamin get started on his soup.’

Toby heard Dad clear his throat and knew a reprimand was coming. But Benjamin spoke first.

‘I didn’t know I had my eyes closed.’ He looked from face to face. ‘I just—’

‘You don’t need to explain anything,’ said Mum. She glanced at Toby. ‘Let’s just eat, shall we?’