

From – The Festival of Stones

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Chapter 5 – the illustrations are omitted

The Most Beautiful Dragon in the Whole World

That evening Farmer John lit the first fire of fall in the living room. He sat down in his armchair, put his feet on the grate, and told his children about Chiron.

“You should have seen him this morning,” he said. “He was so full of energy he raced about the paddock with his tail held high.”

“That’s how I feel at Michaelmas too,” said Tom Nutcracker. “Bursting with energy and ready for brave deeds.”

“Me too,” chimed in June Berry. She was tired and already had her thumb in her mouth.

“Then he charged towards the fence and leapt right over it,” continued Farmer John. “He galloped down the meadow and followed Running River towards the mountains. He didn’t come back for a long time.”

“Where did he go?” asked Tom Nutcracker.

“I don’t know,” replied Farmer John. “But when he came back his eyes were burning like fire.”

June Berry came over and settled on Farmer John’s lap. “Story time,” she said, and snuggled up. Her brother came over and wiggled his way onto his dad’s lap too.

Farmer John scratched his beard and thought for a minute. “Hmmm,” he said at last. “Today is Michaelmas Day, and I will tell you a dragon story. It’s called: *The Most Beautiful Dragon in the Whole World.*”

“Once, a very long time ago, there lived a dragon. He lived in the air like a bird, but never came down to earth. He was a beautiful dragon, with wide, golden wings and a fiery red body. As he flew, the sun glistened and shone from his scales as if they were jewels. And when he breathed, his fiery breath burst forth in yellow and orange flames and burned brightly in the air. Then the flames changed to violet and lilac clouds.

“I am the most beautiful one in all the world,” thought the Dragon. “Nothing can compare to me!”

And it was true. There was nothing in the world as beautiful or more gorgeous than him.

One day, as the golden sun rose over the horizon, it tinged the snow-white clouds with rose and gold. Moments later the sun was red and rich orange, and the clouds all lilac and pink surrounded by a deep blue sky. As the dragon watched the colors shifting and changing he realized it was the sun that made such a beautiful sight – a sight even more beautiful than he could ever be.

Jealousy stirred in the dragon's heart and he began to brood. He realized that even though he was beautiful, it was the sun which showed the world his beauty, that the sun revealed his colors to the world, or even allowed him to see himself.

"I will fly to the sun and eat it," he thought. "Then I shall glow magnificently from inside, and truly be the greatest creation in all the universe."

The dragon spread his great wings and flew fiercely at the sun. Round and round he flew, roaring and bellowing and spewing flames. The people of the earth looked up in dismay and dread to see such a terrible battle taking place in the heavens. At last the dragon gave a great shout and plunged directly at the sun. But, alas, to the dragon's dismay, the beautiful gold which covered his wings melted away and they turned black and leathery. His lovely body lost its redness and became a sour yellow poisoned with the green of envy. At last the sun's light became so brilliant and fierce that it burned deep into his body, and dirty red flames and ash-colored smoke belched from his mouth.

Suddenly an angel appeared from out of the sun and cast shooting stars at the dragon. They cut him like strokes from an iron sword. Burned and defeated, the dragon turned away from the sun, and howling with hate he plunged back to the earth. Deep underground he crawled into a dark cave and licked his wounds.

But the dragon never forgot, and never quite gave up. He remembers his beauty from long ago, and rises out of the earth in summer to fly high in the air. Then, every August, a shower of shooting stars beats the dragon back into the earth with swords of heavenly iron. At Michaelmas the angel that came from the sun appears – for Michael is the angel's true name – and he stands guard over the dragon until the Sun-Child is safely born in the depths of winter.

"And that," said Farmer John, "is the end of the story. And also the time for little folk such as Tom Nutcracker and June Berry to go to sleep." Then he carried his children up to their rooms and tucked them into bed.