

Archie and the Forgotten Dragon

by

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Archie Munro was eight years, four days, seven hours, twenty six minutes and forty two seconds old. It was the very first day that he was allowed to walk to and from school alone. He counted the paces from his home on King Street to the Headmaster's Office in the Cathedral Close and he counted them on the way back again. Archie calculated and collated all sorts of details and wrote them in one of many identical pocket books that he kept for information gathering.

'Why not all the way to your classroom?' His father asked, in between feeding slices of toast and marmite to his little sister.

'Because, when I move from the lower close to the senior school the amount of paces will change and that would make the calculations wrong. I must use fixed points; I should have thought that was obvious.' His father looked puzzled. 'The size of my strides will alter as I grow.' Archie explained.

'Hm, yes they will, and...?'

'I want to know the declining number of paces year on year as my stride lengthens; and whether there will come a time when it might plateau and whether that will correspond with a period of low growth.'

'I see,' said his father not really seeing at all. It was sometimes a burden having a son exceptional at mathematics; a son who was literal, factual and exacting.

'He's either a child genius or something is terribly wrong,' he had said to his wife years ago after bath time. 'Not many four year old boys calculate the capacity of Thomas the Tank Engine and the tonnage of his rubber tug boat. They had him tested by a delightful diminutive psychologist in London. Archie was gifted.'

Archie was permitted to walk to and from school in the Lent term, his parents having decided that at least the days would be lengthening, so that he could make the journey in daylight. There had been much debate about his safety. Archie's mother was against the idea, but his father convinced her that it was far better for children to learn about traffic, strangers and risk at a young age, so that they would know how to deal with a crisis should one arise.

'At least he won't be one of those 'cotton wool kids', disgorged onto the pavement from a four by four, who don't even own a coat because they are never exposed to the elements.'

Archie was given a thorough, if tiresome, safety briefing from his mother. Instructed to use the pelican crossings and not to talk to strangers, or deviate from the agreed route. Finally, after he had made the trip without incident for a fortnight

his mother appeared to relax. He no longer found her looking from an upstairs window or polishing the already shiny door knocker as an excuse to peer along King Street.

'Two thousand, seven hundred and thirty five,' Archie took a deep breath and paused moving his rucksack from his right to his left shoulder.

'That's not the same as yesterday.' A voice said, it was a small voice with a slight nasal twang. 'Why?'

Archie looked around him but there was no one there. The street was quite empty.

'I don't know,' said Archie to the voice. 'I'm trying to work it out. It's not the same in the morning and the evening either, which suggests that my stride varies depending on the time of day, the weather conditions and my physical condition.'

'Does it matter?' asked the voice.

'Well of course it matters. If there are variables to consider, then I must know what they are and take them into account. I would have thought that was obvious.'

'Ooh hoity toity.'

'Why can't I see you?'

'You can,' said the voice. 'If you bother to look.'

'I am looking,' replied Archie irritated.

'Not in the right place.'

'I haven't got time for this, I'll lose count and my experiment will be ruined.'

'Do you think everything in this world goes on at your level?' The voice said testily. Archie bent over to look down a grating in the road.

'Tck,' said the voice. 'Some people have no idea.'

'I'm very clever. I am very good at mathematics.'

'Well, you can do counting, I hear you every day. I am not sure that counting is such a remarkable skill.'

'Oh really...and what can you do that's so special?'

'Breath fire.' There was a significant pause, while Archie took in this information with its outlandish claim.

'Are you a fire eater or an oxyacetylene tool?'

'Neither.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Then you have never met a dragon.'

'Of course I have never met a dragon. They are mythical creatures, like unicorns, they do not exist.'

Archie felt a hot burst of air above his head and a sound rather like the roar of gas. A small flame dropped like a leaf from above, falling onto the damp pavement. It gave a little hiss and extinguished itself beside his shoe. He looked up. A small baleful dragon was looking down on him disdainfully. Archie met its gaze.

‘Do that again.’

‘It’s not a party trick. I don’t perform to order.’ The dragon stated. ‘Anyway, I sometimes run out of puff.’

‘Run out of puff! What sort of a dragon runs out of puff?’ Archie scoffed.

‘The sort of Dragon that is left out in the cold in all weathers! No one has ever thought to provide me with a suitable cave.’ The little dragon’s whinging was beginning to annoy Archie.

‘It could be worse. At least no one is trying to slay you. At one time dragon slaying was quite a popular sport. You’ve heard of St George I expect’.

‘St George?’

‘Patron Saint of England and a notorious dragon slayer? You must have heard of him.’ The little dragon put his head down and looking even more miserable said:

‘I keep very little company. It can be quite lonely up here.’

‘Well you wouldn’t want him for company, he’d kill you with his sword. Anyway, company is not all its cracked up to be. I should know, I was an only child once, until my baby sister came along. Everyone said she would be great company for me; half her life she screamed and when she stopped doing that she messed up my toys and wrecked my bedroom. I could live happily without company.’ Archie concluded.

‘I’ve seen the children making dragons inside the hall. If I stretch my neck really hard I can see into the hall through this corner of the window. They’re going to have a dragon festival. They’re going to have fun. If I had enough breath and fire I would send lapping tongues of fire and burn their festival to ashes,’ he said vengefully.

With great effort and a lot of creaking, the little dragon stretched as far as he could, demonstrating his ability to peer in through the window of the great hall. He let out a pathetic roar and a tiny shard of fire fell out of his mouth and fizzed to nothing in an instant.

Archie sighed; he’d had enough of this conversation. He wasn’t sure if it was two thousand, seven hundred and thirty four or thirty five.

‘I’ve got to go. It’s been very nice talking to you.’ He didn’t think it had been nice actually, but Archie remembered his mother’s instructions about being polite and it being alright to tell a white lie if it was to protect someone’s feelings. His mother

explained this to him after Archie stated that the new dress on which Aunt Sally had sought an opinion, did make her look very fat indeed. As he turned to leave, a group of younger children came out of the hall with their teachers. They were talking excitedly and some of them had paint and tissue paper stuck to their hands. Above him the little dragon assumed his usual fixed demeanour. Archie turned and set off down the street and resumed his counting.

His mother asked Archie why he was late.

'I was talking to a dragon,' he stated plainly and headed for his computer. His mother looked puzzled. It wasn't like Archie to lie, but then neither was it like him to be fanciful or imaginative.

Archie typed in 'dragons' and then refined his search to Komodo dragons, as they appeared to be living creatures, *Varanus Komodoensis*, the native lizard of the island of Komodo Indonesia.

'Did you know that the Komodo dragon is three meters long and weighs seventy kilos? And it can hardly hear or see but has this thing called Jacob's organ, a sort of sensor that helps it navigate in the dark and detect its prey up to 9 kilometres away?'

'No. how amazing. Is this a project for school?' His mother now realized that she must have misunderstood. He must have been talking *about* dragons, not with a dragon.

'How would you calculate the lung capacity of a dragon? Do you think that their lung size corresponds to another similar sized animal?'

'Goodness darling, I have no idea. They do set very odd homework these days.'

Later, Archie tried the same interrogation on his father. That yielded the suggestion that perhaps doctors knew how to calculate lung capacity as they often made him breathe into a tube with measurements on it when checking on his asthma. Archie made a mental note to ask Polly Tempest's mother at the school gate, she was a doctor. The following day, Archie interrupted his counting to tell the dragon that he was working on a plan. He would soon have some information about lung capacity and from that he might well be able to calculate the extent of flame that a dragon of his weight and length should typically be expected to achieve. Then he would know whether his plan to set fire to and destroy the new brightly coloured dragons inside the hall was a viable one.

For almost a week Archie walked back and forth to school with not much more than a passing 'Good morning or good evening dragon.' Occasionally the dragon would make some comment about the number of paces having altered again, and Archie asked about the dragon's wing span, length and weight. In the evenings Archie continued to look up information about dragons and became something of an expert. He learnt that stories of dragons had been told by travellers for 4000 years, and appeared from every corner of the world, from medieval Europe to the Orient. Fire breathing dragons could, he discovered, represent volcanoes and the heat of the core of the earth. He looked at pictures and discovered countless names for dragons, his favourite being Draco. However, he could find no hard evidence for the amount of fire a dragon could generate. Archie did conclude that the little dragon might be right about one thing, being out in the cold day and night might well be affecting his flame throwing powers. Archie had a plan. From the boot of his mother's car he took the picnic rug, it was woollen and cosy, he tucked into his school bag.

The following evening on his way home from school he stopped beneath the little dragon.

'I have been doing investigations and calculations, I have even had the help of a doctor.' he told the dragon proudly.

'Mm...very clever aren't we?' replied the dragon with a hint of sarcasm that was lost on Archie.

'Yes, I am very clever. Anyway, I have estimated your weight and considered your length and height, and made comparisons to other dragons in paintings who are breathing fire and the evidence suggests that you should be able to throw a jet of fire at least one and a half meters, perhaps two. But I think you may have a point about not having a cave. Your body temperature is falling too low at night, you need to be warmer.'

'I told you that.'

Archie ignored the comment and taking out the rug from his school bag he threw it high into the air where it landed on the little dragon covering him completely.

'Why's it dark?' A muffled panicky dragon voice called down to him.

'You don't have very good eyesight anyway,' said Archie. 'Stop making such a fuss.' The little dragon was wriggling and twisting when his head emerged, the rug had settled down onto his neck and back. 'When I come back in the morning we can test your flame and see if it's any better. I've got to go now. Two thousand, seven hundred and twenty seven.' Archie continued on his journey home.

The following morning the little dragon was in better spirits having spent a cosy night tucked under the rug.

'Well,' said Archie. 'Go on try...I can't be late for school.' The little dragon stretched his neck as far as he could, there was less creaking this time, he was far more flexible. He took in a deep breath, puffed up his cheeks and let out a steady stream of flame that extended down for well over a meter and melted the tarmac on the pavement next to Archie.

'Wow,' said Archie and gave a little jump of delight. 'That was great.' The little dragon put his head in the air and made a special dragon noise, which came all the way from the back of his throat. Archie knew he was pleased.

'I can throw a flame, I can throw a flame....' The little dragon chanted in excitement. Archie did a little dance with his feet, adding four more steps to his calculations.

'I've got to go now, but tonight I am going to go into the Hall and open that window and we can see if your new flame can really reach far enough. Keep your blanket on.' Archie set off to school, forgetting in his excitement to count for several paces.

That evening Archie went into the great medieval hall for the first time.

'Can I just have a quick look upstairs? I've only got five minutes, or I'll be late home,' the kind man waved him through.

'Mind yourself though; they are putting up the dragons, stay away from the stepladder.' Archie agreed and set off up the oak staircase. At the top of the stairs he stopped still and looked up at the magnificent oak beams that crossed the trading hall.

'Wow.' He had never seen anything like it. Massive, ancient timbers spanned the building. It was beautiful, and so old. He went over to touch one of the beams that supported the side wall. It had a bit of metal sticking out of it and the marks of men long dead. 'How old is this place?' He asked a man up a stepladder.

'Built in 1427 by a rich merchant called Robert Toppes, well that's what they tell me. They say it's the only surviving medieval trading hall in Western Europe.' Archie blanched.

'Oh. Be awful if anything happened to it then,' he said.

'Yea, it's been lucky. Survived the bombing in the last war and the planners - now that was a miracle. '

'Why?'

'Well at one time, people didn't appreciate old buildings like this one, wanted everything modern, it could easily have gone.' Over on the right hand side Archie saw the carving of a dragon. It had a green body and golden wings and a long tongue of fiery red.

'What's this?' Archie asked.

'This is the dragon, that's why it's called Dragon Hall, they think there were fourteen of them carved in the spandrels.'

What's a spandrel?'

'This is triangular space, here.' He pointed to the gap between the beams. 'We're having a festival, the children have made all these colourful dragons, and there's poetry, it'll be great fun, you should come. It's a celebration of dragons. There's loads of dragons in Norwich you know.' Archie had sidled over to the window, he looked out to his little dragon. Muffled under the rug it winked at him. Archie looked at the dragon with its fiery breath, then looked back at the magnificent ancient hall and decided not to try and open the window.

'I've got to go now,' Archie said. 'It's been very nice talking to you.' And he dashed down the stairs and out into the street. The little dragon was peering down at Archie.

'Why didn't you open the window?'

'We need to talk,' Archie called back. 'I've got to go now. Tomorrow. I'll see you tomorrow.'

That night Archie sat at home glumly staring into space. The Dragon Hall was beautiful. It has survived for centuries. His mother watched him staring out of the window into the darkness.

'Is everything alright Archie?' Archie paused and said:

'What do you do if someone asks you to help them and you do and then you realize that it is unkind and wrong?' His mother thought for a moment.

'I suppose I would want to know why they want to do it, I would think about what their motive is. People sometimes do unkind things because they are unhappy.' Archie nodded.

'Lonely people are sometimes shy people,' she continued. 'They can appear to be cross when really they don't know how to join in or how to make friends. I think you have to help them to join in, you have to show them how to be part of something, how to be kind.' Archie gave a shrug.

'That's what I'll do. Thanks mum.'

When Archie reached the little dragon he was relieved to find that the rug and dropped off and blown some distance down King Street. It was lying crumpled and dirty on the ground. The little dragon was shivering.

‘Do you know how much frost there was last night?’ He said crossly. ‘My wings almost dropped off. I have used all my breath just to keep warm. There will be no flame throwing this morning.’

‘I think that’s just as well.’ Archie replied.

‘You haven’t opened the window.’

‘No and I’m not going to. Did you know that there is a festival for dragons? The children are coming with rhymes, poems, stories and paintings of dragons. There is a dragon trail, you’re on it. They think dragons are magical, exciting and amazing and they have made all these colourful dragons because they *love* dragons.’

‘Nobody loves me. I am a forgotten dragon.’ A large dragon tear welled up in the little dragon’s eye and dropped onto the pavement beside Archie’s shoe.

‘Well, I’m going to tell them. The little dragon outside the Dragon Hall has got to be *the* most important dragon in Norwich. It is because of you that everyone knows this is the Dragon Hall.’

That evening Archie went in to the Dragon Hall, he asked to see the person in charge of dragons. He explained about the lonely and forgotten dragon outside in the cold, that this little dragon needed to join in. How he didn’t know how to make friends and he didn’t know what a very important dragon he really was. When the festival began the little dragon was invited in to the Dragon Hall to hear the stories, the rhymes and poems. If you look very carefully you can just see him sitting beside Archie, who is taking care to stamp on any small tongues of flame coming from the mouth of the little excited dragon.

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