

The Alarm

by Harris Tobias

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The Alarm

A terrible clanging in the middle of the night roused me from my bed. I put on some clothes and hurried into the street there to mingle with my bleary eyed neighbors. At first we thought it was a fire but there was no smoke or flame to be seen. We stood in the cold and beat our arms, the cold air made ghosts of our breath. The clanging didn't let up so we traced it to its source. It came from the old tower on the edge of the village. The rough stone structure had stood there for as long as the village itself. Silent, locked and largely forgotten it stood watching over the village like a rotten tooth. Its thick oak door locked tight, the key long ago lost. I suppose a monkey or an agile youth could have climbed it but no one bothered that I ever heard of. Now it had suddenly come to life and was sounding an alarm that no one knew what for.

"There is one who might remember," said the mayor, "Old Havermeyer, the beggar." So we hurried over to his hut and shook him from his slumber. Old Havermeyer was so old that he was almost completely blind and deaf. He lived in poverty in a tiny shack on the edge of the village. Subsisting on handouts and the begrudging charity of the village's wealthy merchants. He hadn't heard the alarm and didn't understand what we were so excited about. So we got him dressed and brought him to the tower and placed his hands on the oaken door so he could feel the vibrations. Only then did realization dawn on his wrinkled face.

"Ah," he said. "the tower. The alarm sounds. The dragon wakes. We must flee."

This statement caused no end of confusion amongst the good people of the village. Our village was prosperous and peaceful,

unused to emergencies of any kind. "What dragon?" many villagers wanted to know. "There are no dragons," said others. "Superstitious nonsense," interjected the more educated. The incessant clanging continued shouting out all reason and rational thought, so we hurried away to the school house where we could hear ourselves think. We stamped the snow off our boots and lit the stove and soon we could hear old Havermeyer tell what he remembered of the tower, the alarm and the dragon.

"When I was a boy," he spoke in a weak quavering voice we had to strain to hear, "my grandfather told me that his grandfather helped build the tower. In those days the dragon would come every few years and lay waste to half the village. It would fly in like a great winged bird spitting fire, trample the crops and eat the peasants. It was a force of nature. Nothing and no one could stop it. The only way they knew to save themselves was to give it gold. All the gold. For if any of us held back, the dragon would know and its vengeance would be swift. Dragon's love gold more than anything and, when they wake, they are hungry for it."

"These are only old stories to scare the children," said the mayor. "It's been over two hundred years since your grandfather's time and no one has ever seen or heard of a dragon. It's all nonsense I tell you."

"Well those old stories scared me plenty," said the old man. "I for one have never forgotten them. They say a buried chain connects the tower to the dragon. One end is fastened to the bell and the other to the dragon's leg. When the dragon stirs, the bell rings. It gives us time to get away or get our gold together whichever way we decide to save ourselves from ruin."

This was just too much for many villagers to absorb. The whole idea of a fire breathing dragon in this modern age was ridiculous.

"I'm not going to flee my home or lose my fortune because of a bunch of old legends," was the general consensus. Or on the say so of a senile old man was the unspoken subtext. But the seed of fear and doubt had been planted.

"Do as you see fit," said the old man. "My time in this world is

nearly done. I'm too old to flee and I have no gold. I'll stay and share your fate. I'm curious to know if the old stories are true." And on this ominous note old man Havermeyer closed his eyes and said no more. At that moment the incessant clanging from the tower stopped, just as suddenly as it began. The sudden silence struck us all as louder and more worrisome than all the clamor, for it meant that the dragon, or whatever it was, had either gone back to sleep or had broken the chain and was awake.

We were a tired and nervous bunch as we shuffled back to our homes. The sky was already beginning to lighten in the East and we hurriedly agreed to meet again at noon the next day. "Come to the village office," said the mayor, "after we have had some time to think about what to do." The mayor was a good man. A widower and my only real friend. He was respected by the villagers but not loved. I don't know if there village had much love to spare.

The next day dawned bright and clear. What ever sense of gloom and disaster remained from the night before was drowned out by a cloudless blue sky and a bright yellow sun. We joked and laughed at our fear as we went about our morning chores. Someone pointed to the mountain that towered above the village. It was ringed by clouds or was it dragon smoke? The townsfolk eyed their mountain nervously as if at any moment that old familiar friend might visit flaming death upon them.

That morning the children went off to school; the mill wheel turned and the blacksmith's hammer rang out. It was all so normal, the way it had always been, except there was an undertone of fear and apprehension that infused our every move.

At noon we all gathered at the mayor's office to discuss further what, if anything, we should do. Suggestions ranged from taking down the tower to digging into the village archives for more information. Some villagers thought the whole thing was a hoax and others thought we ought to gather our gold together just in case.

Finally, the mayor stood up and spoke. "What we have here is a classic puzzle," he said to the crowded room. "There's no denying

that the alarm we heard was real. What we don't know is what it really means." We all looked at each other and nodded. At last someone was speaking sense. "The oldest man in the village remembers stories about a dragon and the old tower built as an alarm. No one knows if that is true. I propose we send someone into the mountains to seek out this dragon, if indeed there really is one." This suggestion was met with general agreement.

"Furthermore," continued the mayor when the hub-bud died down, "I also recommend we gather our gold and jewels together just in case the dragon proves real. That way we can buy him off and save our lives and property. If there is no dragon, we have lost nothing. If there is, we have saved everything."

The village rose to its feet as one and applauded the mayor's good sense. The mayor asked for volunteers to go into the mountains and seek out the dragon's lair. The room grew very quiet and no one stepped forward.

"In that case I nominate Peer Hansel," exclaimed the mayor. Every eye in the room turned to look at me for Peer Hansel is my name. I blushed scarlet and bowed my head. My nomination was quickly seconded and I was chosen unanimously.

In many ways I was the logical choice for so dangerous a mission. I was unmarried, childless and a relative new comer having lived in the village for only twenty years. Not only that, but I often spent weeks alone in the mountains writing and gathering herbs. I knew the mountains better than most and I was the most expendable. As a bachelor in a village filled with families I was always a bit of a social outcast. The matchmaker had long ago given up trying to match me with any of the village widows and spinsters. So I accepted the mission and told the assembly I would leave immediately. I had never been so popular. My back was slapped and my hand was shaken by neighbors who hadn't spoken to me in years.

"We will gather our gold and jewels here," said the mayor. "I, myself, will record your donations. Everything will be returned when the crisis is over. Bring everything you have. Remember what the old man said about hoarding."

I went home and packed my rucksack and my blanket and headed out for the long march into the hills. It was fine weather and I made good time. As I climbed, the hills grew steep and the trees thinned until I was above them. I could see the great mountain ahead and my tiny village far below. I thought about how I lived there for so long and yet was not accepted as one of them. How willing they were to send me off to find their dragon but not willing to invite me into their homes. They were a small minded, superstitious lot, cruel and stingy they distrusted everyone including each other. I thought about what I was doing. They thought I was brave. Maybe I was. I loved being out in the wilderness and looked forward to spending a couple of peaceful nights under the stars.

After three days, I stumbled into the village a soiled and ragged mess. My clothes charred and my hair smoking. I announced to the council that it was all true. "After a hard march, I stumbled upon the dragon's lair. I was frightened and when the creature saw me, I was nearly devoured on the spot." The council gasped and sat in stunned silence as I told my tale. "It was the closest of calls. The dragon is bigger and more fierce than anything I could imagine. It has been sleeping for 200 years and it is hungry. It plans to ravage the village, devour us all and burn our homes to the ground." The fear in the room was a physical thing.

Only one councilman had the wit to ask, "You spoke with it? It can speak?"

"Oh yes. It speaks all right and it spouts fire with every breath." Here I rolled up my sleeve and showed them my fire singed arm. They all gasped as one.

"How much time do we have? Did you tell it about the gold? What will become of us?" Now the whole group was speaking at once. they were panicked and afraid as well they should be.

"Order. Order," cried the mayor and pounded the table. "Let the man speak."

"I told the beast about the gold and pleaded for our lives. Old man Havermeyer was right— only gold can distract the dragon from its hunger. I told it we would give it all the gold and jewels we had if

only it would leave us alone."

"Yes. Yes," they cried as one. "Give it the gold and let it leave us alone. Let it sleep for another 200 years."

"I can take the gold to the dragon as I know the way. How much is there? Can I carry it myself?"

"Just a minute," said the mayor. "The gold is my responsibility and there is far too much for one man to carry. I shall go with you and make sure everything is as you say."

"Very well," I said. There was that old note of distrust I had always felt in this town. The mayor refused to meet my gaze. He divided the gold into two heavy sacks which we placed on a wooden sleigh. We bid the frightened villagers farewell and headed out to bargain for the village's safety. It was already late in the day. Thankfully there was a full moon to light our way. We didn't stop to make camp. Our sense of urgency kept us going all night long.

We trudged up into the hills, retracing the way I had been a few days before. We climbed above the tree line and looked back on the sleeping village. Around midnight we changed course and headed toward the pass between the mountains. The snow was deep and the going rough. We had not spoken to each other the entire way. Talking took all our strength to drag the heavy sled through the snow. I was tired and the mayor was nearly exhausted being older and sorely out of shape. We were forced to stop and rest many times. When we reached the pass we continued over it and headed down the other side until we reached a fork in the road. There we stopped to rest.

"Did you remember to pay the boy who rang the bell?" I asked. The Mayor nodded. "How about old Havermeyer? Did you pay him for his story?"

"I did everything you asked my friend," the mayor said getting to his feet. He slung his heavy sack over his shoulder. "Well Peer," he said offering me his hand. "We are both rich men now, just as you predicted. The villagers will assume the dragon ate us and took the gold. They will be grateful for the peace it has brought them. Enjoy your wealth and may we meet again someday though I doubt it."

He went to the left toward Urchin and Samarkand, I went right toward Persia and Damascus. The mayor was right. We would never meet again.

