

I admit I wrote this little bit of nonsense while under the influence of P.G. Wodehouse. Indeed, so deeply under the spell of the immortal Plum was I that at one point in the story I completely lost my grip and recklessly committed a nine word act of plagiarism. See if you can spot it. For comparison, refer to the Wodehouse-penned story “The Awakening Of Rollo Podmarsh.”

But, the occasional plagiarism aside, at least my subject matter was original. I thought I was on pretty safe ground in writing of fire-breathing dragons. Wodehouse wrote about witless young aristocrats and plucky young girls and pompous old earls; he never wrote about dragons.

Or so I thought. It was some years after I penned Rare Tim that I came across a collection of very early Wodehouse tales; and there amongst them was a story about a knight, a damsel in distress, and an honest-to-goodness fire-breathing dragon. I sighed, but found some comfort in the fact that nobody will ever read my story. Therefore the charge of plagiarism and old-fashioned copy-catting will undoubtedly never be leveled against me.

## Rare Tim

Chabolla County was a fairly grim slab of unfortunate real estate, consisting primarily of dusty cabbage fields, linked by dusty dirt roads. This blighted blot was home to a few hundred residents (known by neighbouring country-folk as ‘poundheads’) who seemed to do nothing with their lives but trudge up and down the dusty dirt roads with sacks of malnourished cabbages slung over their bent backs.

Rare Tim was something of an oddity, even in this community of oddities. He was a poundhead born and raised, sure enough, but he thought he was something by way of an aristocrat. Somewhere along the line he had gotten the idea into his pumpkin-like head that he was descended of royal blood, and was, therefore, of the nobility. He even went so far as to build a stumpy little stone tower on top of his stumpy little stone house, just so he could call it a ‘castle’. He had christened this pile of rock ‘The Splendid Edifice On Rare Tim Hill’; his neighbours, sensible poundheads that they were, simply referred to it as “yon magnified hen-shed”.

Now, Rare Tim was madly in love with a local girl, the Fair Lady Luticia. How a desolation like Chabolla County could have possibly produced a sparkling diamond such as the Fair Lady Luticia is a mystery beyond mere human comprehension. Her flowing chestnut hair. Her dark smouldering eyes. Her shapely ankles peeping coquettishly out from beneath the hem of full-length earth-tone skirts. Her cute little button nose.

With what words can we sufficiently describe this shimmering vision of female loveliness, this blossoming flower of grace and beauty, this Hot Babe Galore? Perhaps the only phrase which can even hope to do adequate justice to her charms is the crisp and clear, to-the-point exclamation, “Ooh la la.”

But to say that Rare Tim was madly in love with the Fair Lady Luticia is actually to utter the understatement of the year. This poor besotted poundhead nearly had a seizure at the merest mention of her name. Once, while passing in the street, she almost glanced his way, and it was all he could do to keep from throwing himself at her feet and barking like a dog.

Of course the Fair Lady Luticia was not madly in love with Rare Tim. She did not even acknowledge the existence of Rare Tim. Indeed, she did not even know of the existence of Rare Tim. And if she had, she, being an intelligent as well as comely young lass, would have refused to acknowledge the existence of Rare Tim, if only for the sake of proper etiquette.

Nevertheless, Rare Tim, oblivious to the hopelessness of his infatuation, yearned with a fervent desperation for a way to attract her attention. He longed for some plan or design that would result in her flinging herself into his manly arms and declaring her undying admiration and affection for him in breathless tones.

He trudged up and down the dusty dirt roads daily, hoisting his sack of malnourished cabbages from one sore shoulder to the other, and thinking, thinking, thinking. He paced the chilly stone halls of his 'castle' nightly, dodging low-hanging chandeliers, and thinking, thinking, thinking.

Late one night he got it. An idea. An not just any old common-place, dime-a-dozen idea, but the mother of all ideas. A plan in a million. The scheme of a lifetime. So overjoyed was Rare Tim when this pippin came soaring into his brain that he leaped high into the air, banging his pumpkin-like head a good one on a low-hanging chandelier.

The next instant he was racing through the chilly stone halls of his chilly stone 'castle' to his chilly stone library, where he spent the remainder of that sleepless night poring over every scrap of literature, every dusty tome, every leather-bound volume, every unabridged edition, every paragraph, sentence, dot and tittle, that he could hound out which dealt with the fine and ancient art of dragon slaying.

Dragon slaying! What better way to win the undying admiration and affection of the Fair Lady Luticia and send her flinging herself into his manly arms than by whacking off the head of some fearsome fire-breathing dragon that threatened to reduce all of Chabolla County to charred ruin?

Rare Tim studied his subject extensively. Once he got the gist of it, the whole process actually seemed rather simple and straightforward.

Step One: A fearsome fire-breathing dragon descends in flame and terror upon some peaceful, drowsy village, steals all the gold and silver in town and piles it up in some nearby cave or lair, then flops down upon it for a little hundred-year snooze.

Step Two: The brave hero or doughty knight comes galloping up on his gallant steed, whacks off the dragon's head with his trusty sword, and gallops back to town in triumph.

Step Three: The brave hero or doughty knight's lady-love hitches up her skirts and comes running to meet him, weeping with joy and glee and whatnot, then flings herself into his manly arms and declares her undying admiration and affection for him in breathless tones.

It was all so easy. Just follow the clear step-by-step instructions set forth in the books, stick to the specified plan of action, and smooth sailing all the way. Why, any half-witted child could do it, standing on his head and blindfolded even. It would be sheer cake for Rare Tim.

He sighed and imagined himself galloping along the dusty dirt roads upon his gallant steed, brandishing his trusty sword in triumph. He sighed and imagined the crowds of poundheads lining the streets, throwing their caps into the air and cheering, "Rare Tim! Rare Tim! You have slain the fearsome fire-breathing dragon and saved all of Chabolla County from being reduced to charred ruin! Wahoo!"

He sighed and very vividly imagined the Fair Lady Luticia hitching up her skirts and running to meet him, flinging herself into his manly arms and declaring in breathless tones, "Oh, my brave and doughty Rare Tim! You're the guy for me, bubba!"

All the next day, as he trudged up and down the dusty dirt roads with a sack of malnourished cabbages slung over his bent back, Rare Tim sighed and imagined the whole scene, especially the part where the Fair Lady Luticia flings herself into his manly arms. He spent that evening pottering aimlessly about his 'castle', bumping absent-mindedly into low-hanging chandeliers, and sighing and imagining, sighing and imagining.

He was relaxing before the fire, sighing and imagining, when suddenly a thought came rudely barging into his brain; a thought so disastrous and calamitous that he leaped from his chair and banged his pumpkin-like head a good one on a low-hanging chandelier. He stood frozen to the spot, trembling in every limb, stricken in soul and spirit, aching in noggin.

Feverishly, Rare Tim mentally counted off the various components required to carry off this feat of daring and bravery and bring it to a satisfactory conclusion. First, did he have a gallant steed? Yes, he did have a gallant steed; or, at least, close enough. Actually it was a rather decrepit old cabbage-mule that bared its teeth at him and attempted to kick him soundly in the seat of his pants whenever he came within twenty yards of it, but he could bribe it with an apple or two and it should suffice.

Next, did he have a trusty sword? Yes, he did have a trusty sword; or, at least, close enough. Actually it was a worn-out old cabbage knife with a rusty blade; but he could sharpen it up to a keen edge and it should do the trick.

And finally, did he have a fearsome fire-breathing dragon? Hmm. Did he have a fearsome fire-breathing dragon? When you really came right down to it, and cut to the chase, and stopped beating about the bush, and got to the point, and really gave the crux of the matter some serious thought, did he have a fearsome fire-breathing dragon?

Well, to be perfectly open and honest and candid and frank and manly about it...er, no, he did not. This posed a bit of a stumper. After all, a fearsome fire-breathing dragon was rather essential to the plan.

Rare Tim slumped down into his chair, aghast and despairing. How on earth could he carry out this brave and daring feat of whacking off the head a fearsome fire-breathing dragon when he did not have a fearsome fire-breathing dragon to whack the head off of? Where on earth could he get hold of a fearsome fire-breathing dragon in this day and age? Apparently back in ye olden days there were flocks of them, hanging about street corners, cracking jokes and punching each other, frying the occasional passer-by to a crisp, and making a general nuisance of themselves. But what became of them all? You never see them around.

Rare Tim slowly paced the chilly stone hall of his 'castle', absent-mindedly bumping into low-hanging chandeliers, and thinking, thinking, thinking. But, alas, strain the brain nearly to breaking point though he did, he could dredge up nothing from the old grey matter that would solve the present shortage of fearsome fire-breathing dragons. Despondent, he trudged off to bed and sank into a troubled sleep.

Now, when we say 'troubled sleep' we, of course, do not mean that Rare Tim slept fitfully, tossing and turning, waking often, or anything like that. No, for no matter the current circumstances or his state of mind, when Rare Tim hit the hay of an evening, that hay got jolly well hit. He slept like a dead toad. A well-aimed sledgehammer upside his pumpkin-like head probably couldn't rouse him from his slumbers.

So, understandably enough, when during the watches of the night a genuine honest-to-goodness fearsome fire-breathing dragon flew low over the stumpy little stone tower of his 'castle' and descended in flame and terror upon Chabolla County, all Rare Tim did was roll over in his sleep and mutter something about fair lady cabbage-mules and fire-breathing Luticias.

When Rare Tim awoke the next morning, his first conscious thought was that he smelled something burning. He wondered if he had left a pan of cabbages on the stove the previous night. Then it all came back to him: the heroic dragon-slaying plan that was to result in his winning the undying admiration and affection of the Fair Lady Luticia, and the crumbling into dust of that dream due to an unfortunate lack of dragons. Rare Tim realised that what he smelled was merely the remains of all his hopes and dreams going up in smoke and ashes.

He stumbled wearily over to the window to see what kind of dreary, miserable, dismal, bleak, rotten, and wretched day it was going to be. And, looking out, he received the most pleasant shock of his life. Charred ruin as far as the eye could see. Was it possible? Could it be? Rare Tim leaped down the stairs and ran outside. A local poundhead with singed eyebrows was trudging up the dusty dirt road with a sack of charcoaled cabbages slung over his bent back. It was Chewy Stoky, a distant neighbour and recognised county-wide grouch of the first water.

Rare Tim called out to him: "I say there, Chewy! What news this fine morning?"

Chewy raised his singed eyebrows and said, "Fine morning? Fine morning, did you say? Did you say fine morning? What, may I ask, has led you to believe that this particular morning is a fine morning? What, may I ask, is there about this particular morning that has caused you to draw the conclusion that this particular morning is a fine morning at all?"

"Well—" said Rare Tim.

"I, for one," continued Chewy Stoky, "do not share your sentiment that this particular morning is, in fact, as you say, a fine morning. I, for one, am of the personal opinion that there is nothing even remotely resembling anything fine, to use your expression, about this particular morning at all."

"Well—" said Rare Tim.

How, may I ask," continued Chewy, "could this particular morning be a fine morning when just last night a great blasted dragon came blazing down out of the sky and reduced half my cabbage crop to charred ruin? A great blasted dragon blazing down out of the sky and reducing half my cabbage crop to charred ruin does not result in what I would call a fine morning."

"A dragon? How terrible!" cried Rare Tim, delightedly. Things were looking up.

"A great blasted dragon by itself," continued Chewy, "is something I could handle. A great blasted dragon blazing down out of the sky is something I could deal with. But a great blasted dragon blazing down out of the sky and reducing half my cabbage crop to charred ruin is something that I, for one, simply cannot tolerate. No, sir, I cannot! I cannot tolerate it, sir!"

"Well—" said Rare Tim.

"For your information," continued Chewy, "I have nine children. Nine children, I'll have you know, who are doing their very level and utmost best to eat me out of house and hearth and home. Nine children howling at the top of their lungs morning, noon, and night for cabbage soup; and half my cabbage crop in charred ruin."

"But—" said Rare Tim.

“Nine children!”

“But—” said Rare Tim.

“Charred ruin!”

“But—” said Rare Tim, “where is this dragon now?”

“Where?” cried Chewy Stoky. “Where, did you ask? Did you ask where? Are you asking me where this great blasted dragon is now? Is that what you are asking me? I’ll tell you where this great blasted dragon is now. I know where, and I’ll tell you where. This great blasted dragon is, right now, in my barn, at this very moment, lying on top of a pile of my soup spoons, even as we speak, taking a blasted nap! That’s right. That’s where. In my barn, for your information. Lying on top of a pile of my soup spoons, if it interests you. Taking a blasted nap, I’ll have you know.”

“Soup spoons?” Rare Tim felt a pang of apprehension. According to all those books and tomes and volumes he had read that dealt with the fine and ancient art of dragon slaying, fearsome fire-breathing dragons did not pile up hoards of soup spoons. They piled up hoards of gold and silver. They piled up hoards of jewels and precious stones. They piled up hoards of treasures and riches of all shapes and sizes and styles and types and kinds and varieties. But they did not pile up hoards of soup spoons.

“Soup spoons, Chewy?” he asked. “What soup spoons? Why soup spoons? What’s all this talk I’m hearing lately about soup spoons?”

“Soup spoons?” cried Chewy Stoky. “Soup spoons, did you say? Did you say soup spoons? Are you asking me what all this talk about soup spoons is? Is that what you are asking me? I’ll tell you what all this talk about soup spoons is. I know what all this talk about soup spoons is, and I’ll tell you what all this talk about soup spoons is.”

“Well, go ahead, already,” said Rare Tim, whose head was beginning to swim.

“I will,” said Chewy. “This great blasted dragon came blazing down out of the sky and, after reducing half of my cabbage crop to charred ruin, I’ll have you know, grabbed that young fool Toddbo Teddy—who was standing there gaping among the ashes wearing green camouflage as if he thought the dragon wouldn’t see him—by the scruff of his neck and demanded that he, Toddbo Teddy, haul out all the gold and silver in the county and bring it to him, the dragon, and be right quick about it, too. Toddbo Teddy, of all people!”

“But, what—” said Rare Tim.

“Gold and silver, of all things!”

“But, what—” said Rare Tim.

“Then he, Toddbo Teddy,” continued Chewy, “told him, the dragon, that he, Toddbo Teddy, couldn’t bring any gold or silver to him, the dragon, because there isn’t any gold or silver for him, Toddbo Teddy, to bring to him, the dragon, and he, the dragon, demanded that he, Toddbo Teddy, tell him, the dragon, why not, and he, Toddbo Teddy, told him, the dragon, that this is Chabolla County and everybody knows that nobody in Chabolla County has any gold or silver, except maybe the Fair Lady Luticia, and he, Toddbo Teddy, would think twice before attempting to take anything from the Fair Lady Luticia if he, Toddbo Teddy, were him, the dragon.”

“But, I say there, Chewy,” said Rare Tim, who was feeling decidedly dizzy and wishing he had never spoken a word to this human merry-go-round in the first place, “what does all this have to do with the soup spoons? Remember, you were going to tell me about the soup spoons?”

“Soup spoons?” cried Chewy Stoky. “Soup spoons, did you say? Did you say—”

“Dash it all, Chewy!” Rare Tim danced a step or two in frustration. “Just tell me! Don’t keep repeating everything I say seven times like a feeble-minded parrot! Just say it!”

“Now, now, young man,” said Chewy, quietly and soothingly. “There is no need to become excited and raise your voice. If you will only remain calm, I will be most pleased to continue relating my narrative concerning the events of last night for your enlightenment and edification.”

“Good. Go ahead.”

“Good?” cried Chewy. “Good, did you say? Did you say good? I, for one, would like to know what is so good about it! I, for one, do not think that there is anything good about it at all! After that young fool, Toddbo Teddy, told the dragon there was no gold or silver to be had in Chabolla County, the dragon dropped Toddbo Teddy onto the seat of his pants and then proceeded to go digging and rooting about inside my house! Digging, of all things!”

“Really. What a cad,” said Rare Tim, thinking to humour this lunatic, in the hope that it may speed things up a bit.

“Rooting, of all things!”

“Really. By gad, what a cad,” said Rare Tim, continuing to humour, but with waning hope.

“Inside my house!”

“Yes, I get the picture,” said Rare Tim, losing both his humour and his hope, and only wishing now that a low-hanging chandelier would come blazing down out of the sky and flatten the daylight out of this raving pantaloons.

“Then,” continued Chewy, oblivious, “this great blasted dragon came out of my house, I’ll have you know, clutching all of my soup spoons in his claws, for your information, and hauled them out to my barn, if it interests you, and that’s where the whole lot of them are right now, at this self-same moment, with this great blasted dragon lying on top of them taking a nap, of all things!”

“Well—” said Rare Tim.

“For your information,” continued Chewy Stoky, “I have nine children. That is a lot of children. Nine children, in fact, to be precise. Those nine children eat a lot of cabbage soup. Those nine children eat that cabbage soup with soup spoons. A lot of soup spoons. And now what? I’ll tell you know what. Nine children, all of them howling at the top of their lungs for cabbage soup, and no soup spoons for those nine howling children to eat their cabbage soup with. How can those nine children, still howling, I’ll have you know, eat their cabbage soup if they don’t have any soup spoons to eat their cabbage soup with? Tell me that. Answer me that. Nine children, I’ll have you know. No soup spoons, I’ll have you know.”

“What a tragedy,” said Rare Tim. “Well, have a nice day.”

He turned and raced back to his ‘castle’, ignoring the outraged cries of “Nice? Nice?” behind him. He charged down the chilly stone hallway, smashing the daylights out of a low-hanging chandelier in his eagerness. He grabbed up his trusty though rusty cabbage knife and rushed out to the stables. He leaped upon his gallant cabbage-mule’s back, causing that good animal to immediately buck him off and attempt to bit him on the scruff of his neck. Rare Tim clambered back up, cautiously this time, and spurred the mule into a lethargic plod. He brandished his knife aloft heroically as the mule plodded out into the dusty dirt road.

After a while Rare Tim’s arm fell asleep, so he ceased to brandish his trusty knife aloft heroically. In fact, seeing as how it was taking quite some time for his gallant cabbage-mule to plod its slow way out to the barn where the fearsome fire-breathing dragon was now snoozing upon its hoard of soup spoons, and seeing as how the day was becoming rather warm upon Rare Tim’s back, he proceeded to follow the example of both his arm and the dragon. That is to say, he nodded off. In fact, he slept like a dead toad.

Some hours later, Rare Tim awoke with a start, lost his balance, and fell off his gallant cabbage-mule’s back, causing that good animal to attempt to bite him on the seat of his pants. After scrambling to safety, Rare Tim stood up and looked around. There before him was the barn. Two thin wisps of smoke were curling up from the open doorway. Rare Tim could hear the dragon snoring within.

“This is it!” he cried to his gallant cabbage-mule. “This is the moment we’ve been waiting for! Prepare to gallop back to town in triumph!”

The cabbage-mule bared its teeth at him, and trotted away at a surprisingly brisk pace for a beast its age. It was soon lost from view.

“What a coward,” said Rare Tim. “Well, who needs him anyways?” He crept to the barn door and peeped in. It was fairly dark inside, but he could dimly see the hulking shape of the fearsome fire-breathing dragon coiled up atop the heap of soup spoons. Rare Tim summoned and mustered and gathered up all his courage, and tip-toed inside.

Rare Tim tip-toed closer and closer, hardly daring to breathe, until he was right beside the great monster’s nostrils, and what a horrifying sight that was. He nearly lost heart right then and there, but the thought of the Fair Lady Luticia hitching up her skirts and flinging herself into his arms rallied him. Rare Tim brandished his trusty knife and prepared to make a sweeping blow.

Then he paused. He recalled all those books and tomes and whatnot that he had read concerning the fine and ancient art of dragon slaying. He thought of all those brave heroes and doughty knights of old. Did those worthy men of yester-year slay their dragon by simply tip-toeing up and whacking off its head while it was deep in slumber? Did they win the undying admiration and affection of their lady-love by simply tip-toeing up and whacking off the head of a snoozing dragon?

Rare Tim thought not. He stood there beside the snoring dragon for some minutes, thinking things through. He meditated and mused. He pondered and brooded. He considered all the angles. He weighed the pros and cons. He sifted the evidence. He stirred the batter. And, finally, he came to a manly conclusion. Not a prudent or sensible conclusion, but manly.

He couldn’t simply tip-toe up and whack off the head of this snoozing dragon, no matter how fearsome or fire-

breathing it may be. That would not be a brave and daring feat of...well, bravery and daring. The Fair Lady Luticia would hardly be impressed by such a cowardly act. If Rare Tim were to gallop (well, walk now, actually) back to town and announce that he had just whacked off the head of a snoozing dragon, the Fair Lady Luticia would probably not fling herself into his arms. More than likely, she would just sniff at him once or twice as if he were one of last year's leftover cabbages, draw her skirts aside, and stroll proudly yet gracefully away with her cute little button nose in the air.

Now that Rare Tim thought about it, he seemed to remember that, on at least two occasions recorded in those books, somebody had first crept into the dragon's lair and stolen some small trinket from its hoard. The dragon, being a sensitive soul, had sensed in its sleep that the trinket was missing, and had awakened in a fury and gone roaring outside to catch the thief and fry him to a crisp. That had given the brave hero or doughty knight a chance to slay the dragon in a sufficiently daring manner guaranteed to crowd the streets with lady-loves of all shapes and sizes and styles and types and kinds and varieties, jostling and elbowing each other in a frantic attempt to fling themselves into the hero's manly arms.

Would it not seem more of a brave and daring feat of...er, bravery and daring if he, Rare Tim, first pocketed a soup spoon or two from the dragon's hoard, and then waited just outside the barn door for it to come roaring out? He could easily whack off its head as it was emerging from the door, thereby omitting the unnecessary and, in his opinion, rather gratuitous show of engaging the monster face-to-face in mortal combat.

Rare Tim ever so slowly reached down and snagged a soup spoon. He ever so slowly turned and began to tip-toe toward the door. Everything so far was going just right, he thought to himself. By gosh, you gotta hand it to those books. Just follow the clear step-by-step procedure laid out in the books. Keep to the specified plan of action as prescribed by the books. Smooth sailing all the way. Yessiree, no doubt about it, it always pays to read a few good books.

Just then the dragon stopped snoring. Rare Tim, oblivious, continued tip-toeing toward the door. The dragon opened one eye. Rare Tim tip-toed toward the door. The dragon raised one eyebrow. Rare Tim tip-toed toward the door. The dragon aimed one nostril. Rare Tim tip-toed toward the door. There was a brief flash of flame and a quick "poof".

And Rare Tim was fried to a crisp on the spot.

In his research, extensive though it was, into the fine and ancient art of dragon slaying, Rare Tim neglected to notice one vital fact. And that one vital fact that Rare Tim neglected to notice was this: There are dragons, and there are dragons. That is to say, there are dragons who are of high and ancient lineage. They are descended of royal blood. They are proud and dignified. They are dragon aristocrats. They are well versed in the fine and ancient art of dragon slaying. They know all about the clear step-by-step procedure and the specified plan of action. Therefore, they know the accepted role that they play in the grand scheme of things. They know proper dragon etiquette. They are the dragon nobility.

And then, there are dragons who, to put it kindly, are not. This particular dragon, currently snoozing upon a bed of soup spoons in a cabbage barn in the middle of blighted Chabolla County, was in the 'not' class. No proud and dignified dragon aristocrat, descended of royal blood and of the nobility and all that, would ever bring shame and disgrace upon the honour of its high and ancient lineage by descending in flame and terror upon such a one-dog town as Chabolla County. That would not be proper dragon etiquette.

But this particular dragon had no high and ancient lineage to bring shame and disgrace upon the honour of. In fact, this particular dragon was, more or less, the dragon equivalent of a poundhead. It had been hatched and

raised in a fairly grim slab of desolated countryside that was the dragon equivalent of a Chabolla County.

This particular dragon was, therefore, not very well versed in the fine and ancient art of dragon slaying. It didn't know its accepted role in the grand scheme of things. It didn't know proper dragon etiquette. It didn't know the clear step-by-step procedure or the specified plan of action.

But let us not be over hasty in blaming the dragon for not playing its part. This dragon had never read a book in its life. How was it to know?