



Learn English Through Stories

C Series

C36

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The Dragon of Wawel Hill

By Cheryl Rao

Are you sure that there are no dragons in the world? They may be asleep or they may be in hiding, and one day they could come out with their scaly skins and their sharp claws and fiery breath ... And if they are not friendly, we humans are going to be in trouble. So, it would be a good idea to remember how dragons were defeated in the past. It could be a lesson for your survival in the future.

Long long ago, a dragon lived in a labyrinth of caves that led into and under a hill on the banks of the river Wisla or Vistula in Poland. The dragon was a lazy guy and he slept for months on end. Then, when he awoke, he would go out into the countryside and eat as much as he could. If he didn't find any food close by, he would spread his wings and fly a short distance away to the nearby forests to eat a few animals. He would always come back to his home under the hill because he loved his huge cave. He could spread his wings. He could roll about in it without bumping himself.

When he woke up and was thirsty, there was water nearby to drink. He didn't want to ever leave this wonderful place.

With the river close by, the land around it was fertile. People could cultivate the land, they could grow enough food for themselves and their families. It was a good place for people to settle down – and this is exactly what young Prince Krakus thought when he passed this way one day with his hunting party.

'This is like paradise on earth,' murmured Prince Krakus. In his head, he could see a beautiful palace on top of the hill and he could see a busy little town below and farmhouses all around. 'This is just what I was looking for!

This land is empty and doesn't seem to belong to anyone. I will set up my own kingdom here.'

Being the younger son of his father, Prince Krakus could not inherit his father's throne. He loved his elder brother and thought that he would make a good king one day. The problem was that he, Krakus, too, would make a good king.

So, now that he was a young man, why not go out into the world with his friends and their friends and set up his own kingdom, he thought. And that is exactly what he did. The farmers came first, then others followed – and soon there was a busy town on the banks of the river. It took its name from its king and began to be called Krakow.

Everyone was some distance away from the hill – and so, no one knew that a dragon lived there. But, every few months, they heard the sound of thunder and saw fire in the distance. And on those nights, they would find that some of their cattle and goats and sheep that were grazing outside in the meadows would mysteriously disappear. ‘What could it be?’ wondered the simple people. They quickly built barns and sheds to protect their animals – and thus the months and years passed. Harvest time came and went and there was great rejoicing. There was plenty of food for everyone – and they had plenty of leftover grain and other things to take to the nearby towns to sell.

But the town that grew up below the hill began to attract the attention of other rulers nearby. ‘We will not be safe if we are attacked,’ thought King Krakus. ‘We need a fortress with strong walls to see our enemy coming.’ King Krakus decided that it was time to build a strong castle on the hill so that the town and the farmland could be protected.

But, as soon as work on the castle began, trouble started. The sound of digging disturbed the dragon while he rested for weeks on end. He covered his head with his wings and turned over but part of the roof of the cave began to fall. ‘What is happening?’ he cried. He snorted and rose to his feet and trundled out of the cave and looked up and around him.

He was astonished. While he had slept, thick walls had come up, there were buildings and houses under construction on the hill as well, and there were people and animals everywhere.

Of course, the dragon wasn’t interested in the buildings and walls. What he was interested in was his stomach. ‘Food!’ cried the dragon. ‘Food right here for me!’ And he pounced on some bullocks and horses and carried them into his cave and ate them up.

As usual, as soon as his stomach was full, he began to feel sleepy. He closed his eyes and would have fallen asleep had he not felt something small strike his chest. He opened his eyes and saw a cloud of arrows coming at him. Naturally, none of the arrows penetrated his thick skin, so he just ignored them, shook his head a bit and put it down on his feet.

‘Foolish people,’ he thought. ‘What harm can those silly little sticks do to me?’

Then he heard a shout. He raised his head again and found that the entrance to his cave was blocked by soldiers with their swords drawn. ‘More sticks!’ thought the dragon. He was irritated. He had eaten well. All he wanted to do was sleep – and these silly creatures were not letting him do that!

The dragon lifted one foot and swiped at the soldiers. They screamed in pain – and some of them went flying down the hill, some of them fell into the water, some landed on rocks and hurt themselves badly, some rolled down the hill and landed in the bushes.

The dragon came to the entrance of the cave, flapped his wings and opened his mouth to show all his teeth. He roared and blew fire through his nose and everyone ran away from him and hid.

As soon as all the people were out of sight, the dragon went back into his cave, flopped down on the floor and fell asleep.

He didn't know that for the next few weeks, there were meetings, there was planning, there was much talk. 'We have to get rid of the dragon!' everyone said.

'How?' asked the soldiers. 'Our arrows and our swords don't do any damage – how do we kill him?'

Now that everyone knew there was a dragon in the cave, they began to watch out for him. The king appointed three men to note down the routine of the dragon: when it woke up, what it ate, how long it slept, and so on.

And thus, they came to know that the dragon was lazy. He woke up only twelve times a year. Then he came out in search of food, ate, and went back to sleep. He didn't trouble anyone unless he was hungry.

'So why don't we make sure that the dragon remains well-fed?' said one of the courtiers. 'If we keep his food inside the cave for him, he won't come out of the cave to kill any of us.'

'That is a good idea,' said the king. The other courtiers agreed. So did the rest of the townspeople.

And thus, every month, when people heard a rumbling in the cave, they knew the dragon was hungry and would soon be waking up. Several animals were kept at the entrance of the cave. As soon as the dragon opened his eyes, there they were – and pop, they went into his mouth. After he finished eating, the dragon would slide down to the river on his tail, drink, wash up a bit, and then get back to the cave to sleep.

All went well for some time. Then, the dragon got greedier. 'These animals are old and scrawny!' he roared. 'Tasteless! There's no meat on the bones, no fat, nothing! I want a change! I want something better to eat!'

And the dragon tossed out the old animals and went roaring into town. There was pandemonium. Everyone ran for their lives. The dragon flew up and down, ran here and there, burning everything with his breath, but he couldn't find anyone or anything to eat. Everyone had locked themselves into their homes.

So the dragon flew out into the fields and there he came upon a group of young girls who were singing and skipping. The dragon flattened himself down and slowed his breath. He didn't want to be seen. He crept closer and closer and then with one leap, he was in front of the girls and he grabbed them and tossed them into his mouth without a second thought.

'Mmmm! That was yummy!' said the dragon. 'I think I'll stick to this for my meals! Nothing else will do!'

He turned and marched off to the cave but before he went in, he roared out for the king's attention. 'Give me a young girl each time I wake up and I will leave you and your townspeople alone!'

The king was shocked. So was everyone else. How could they give in to the dragon's demand? How could they give their beloved young daughters to him to be eaten? They had to find a way to get rid of the dragon permanently!

They had plenty of time to think, but none of them could come up with a solution. Knights and nobles and soldiers took up arms against the dragon, but they couldn't do anything. They were either burnt to death by the dragon's breath or tossed to their death or eaten alive.

'Save our girls!' said the king. He was as worried as the rest of his people because he had three beautiful daughters. Two of them were still very young, but he knew that if girls were given regularly to the dragon, soon all three of his daughters would also end up in the dragon's stomach.

'I will give my eldest daughter's hand in marriage to whoever kills that dragon!' said the king.

From all over the countryside, young men came to try their hand at killing the dragon. It was still asleep and they could enter the cave and try their luck – but when they did, the dragon just shrugged and swatted them in his sleep and they were left with broken bones and that was the end of their attempt.

One day, a young shoemaker named Skuba, who had been thinking a lot about the dragon and how to defeat it, went to the king. 'I will do it,' he said. 'I will rid your kingdom of the dragon.'

'Do it soon!' said the king.

The dragon was due to wake up in another few days. Skuba the shoemaker had to put his plan into action soon. It was simple. He regularly collected animal skins from the butcher, so he had a number of sheepskins with him. He stitched several of them together to make it appear like a very large sheep. Then he filled the sheep with plenty of sulphur and big bits of raw meat to cover up the smell of the sulphur.

He dragged the 'sheep' to the entrance of the cave. He peered in to make sure the dragon was still asleep – after all, he didn't want to be the dragon's next meal, did he? To his relief, all he could hear was the sound of even breathing,

but as he watched, the dragon moved his head a bit and his nose twitched. 'It's time! It's time!' he thought. 'He's going to get up any minute now!'

Skuba left the 'sheep' tethered there and scrambled away from the mouth of the cave. He didn't want to be anywhere around when the dragon woke up completely.

He was just in time. From above, he heard a roar that slowly seemed to peter out. The ground shook a bit and Skuba imagined that the dragon was walking towards the 'sheep'.

He was right. The dragon woke up and saw this large 'sheep' in front of him. He took a deep breath and he got the wonderful aroma of sheep flesh so he didn't think. He pounced on the 'sheep' and popped it into his mouth and after two quick crunches it went down his throat and into his stomach.

The dragon sat down for a moment. He felt full. Satisfied. But, oh, what was that? Suddenly his stomach didn't feel so good.

'Oh my goodness, it burns!' roared the dragon, jumping up and hitting his head on the roof of the cave. He didn't feel the bump that came up on the top of his head because his stomach burnt too much and now that burning feeling seemed to be everywhere inside him.

'Water! Water! I need water!' the dragon cried. He ran out of the cave and took a flying leap into the Wisla river. He didn't know that whoever lived within sight of the river was peeping out from their windows watching as he drank and drank and drank.

'Phoo – phoo!' breathed the dragon. He sat back in the water and waited to feel better. 'I'll give it a little time. The water will cool down the burning,' he thought. But a minute went by and another minute and the burning got even worse. In fact, it seemed to be spreading.

'More water! I need more water!' thought the dragon and put his head back into the river and kept on drinking.

He didn't know it, but the people who were watching could see his body begin to bloat up. Bigger – bigger – bigger. And then suddenly, when his body could take in no more water, the skin of his stomach and chest split wide open and his insides came bursting out. Intestines, liver, heart: like a huge fountain they flew up in the air with the force of the water in his body.

The rest of him fell back into the water and lay still. The dragon was dead.

The king and the people couldn't believe their eyes. They stood transfixed, thinking that the dragon would move again. Roar again. But it did not – and they came rushing out, laughing and shouting with joy and relief.

'You did it! You did it!' said the king to Skuba. 'You did what our bravest warriors could not! You deserve to be a prince and you will be when you marry my daughter.'

Skuba lowered his head and bowed before the king. 'Your Majesty, I am truly grateful that you think I deserve to marry the beautiful princess, but I don't think I know how to be a prince and I don't know if I can make a princess happy. Please do not make me her husband.'

The king was dumbstruck. He couldn't believe that this young man was ready to give up the chance of a lifetime: to marry a princess, become a prince, rule a kingdom!

Skuba went on. 'Sire, all I want is for you to give me the skin of the dragon.'

'Done!' said the king. 'It is yours. Do with it what you will.'

Skuba bowed and left the king's presence and hurried down to the river. There, with the help of his friends, he dragged what was left of the dragon out of the water. Then he separated the flesh and the bones from the skin and took the skin home.

And guess what he did with the skin?

You're right. He made shoes! He was, after all, a shoemaker and that is what he knew best.

Today, if you go to Krakow, and wander around the streets of the old town, keep your eyes peeled for shoes made of dragon skin. You may be lucky enough to find a pair that fits you. Dragon skin shoes give you special powers. What powers, you may ask. Well, you'll find out when you get those shoes!

In Krakow today, at the base of Wawel Hill (which some will tell you gets its name from the dragon Smok Wawelski) there is a statue of a dragon. From time to time, it 'breathes fire'. In fact, you can program it to do that with your phone.

On Wawel Hill, at the entrance to the church, you will see some huge bones hanging on the wall. You will be told that these bones are those of a mammoth, a rhino and a whale but for many years it was believed that the bones were really that of the dragon.

We ought to believe in what science proves, isn't it? So go ahead and tell yourself that those bones are not from the dragon that lived in the cave below Wawel Hill. And don't wonder, as I do, whether somewhere in that cave there could be another dragon sleeping silently – and waiting until it is hungry to rise and breathe fire once again.

2. Picture Dictionary Page

E e

each

adjective

every single one.
They each received a present.

eager

adjective

wanting to do or have something very much.
The riders were eager to start the race.
eagerly *adverb*

eagle

eagles *noun*

a large bird of prey that lives in mountainous areas. Eagles eat animals and birds and have good eyesight for spotting prey a long way off.



golden eagle

early

adverb

1 near the beginning.
The hero dies early in the film.
2 before the expected time.
He arrived early for the show.
■ comparisons **earlier** **earliest**
■ opposite **late**

earn

earns **earning** **earned** *verb*
to get something because you have worked for it or deserve it.

They earned some extra money by washing cars.

earring

earrings *noun*

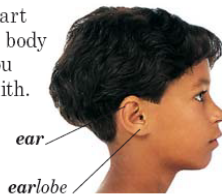
a piece of jewelry that can be attached to, or hung from, the earlobe (see **jewelry** on page 112).



ear

ears *noun*

1 the part of your body that you hear with.



2 the top of a cereal stalk where the seeds grow.



ear of wheat

Earth

noun

the planet that we live on.



earth

noun

1 the surface of the land or ground.
2 the material that plants grow in.

earthquake

earthquakes *noun*

a violent shaking of the ground, because of movement from within the Earth.

east

noun

one of the four main compass directions. East is the direction in which the Sun rises.



eastern *adjective*

easy

adjective

simple, not difficult.
■ comparisons **easier** **easiest**
■ opposite **difficult**

eat

eats **eating** **ate** **eaten** *verb*

to take in food through your mouth.



echo

echoes *noun*

a sound that bounces off a surface and repeats itself.
My voice echoed in the cave.
■ say **eh**-ko
echo *verb*

eclipse

eclipses *noun*

1 a time when the Moon comes between the Earth and the Sun, hiding the Sun's light.



An eclipse of the Sun.

2 a time when the Earth comes between the Sun and the Moon, hiding the Moon's light.

An eclipse of the Moon.

ecology

noun

the study of how animals, plants, and humans affect one another and how they live in their environment.
■ say **ee**-kol-o-jee

edge

edges *noun*

the border of something.



Flowers lined the path's edge.

edible

adjective

safe to eat.
Are these mushrooms edible?