

LEVEL 3.9

**RAISING DRAGONS**

Nolen, Jerdine

Pa didn't know a thing about raising dragons. He raised corn and peas and barley and wheat. He raised sheep and cows and pigs and chickens. He raised just about everything we needed for life on our farm, but he didn't know a thing about raising dragons. Ma didn't know about dragons, either. She made a real nice home for us. But when it came to dragons, she didn't even know what they wanted for dessert! Now me, I knew everything about dragons, and I knew they were real. At first Pa thought the notion of dragons on a farm was just plain foolishness. I'm not too particular about fanciful critters. And, I don't have any time for make-believe," he told me one day. So when

Pa said he didn't want to talk anymore, I knew I'd better keep my opinions to myself. I did my chores with my thoughts in my head at one end of the barn while Pa worked at the other end with his thoughts.

I remembered the day my life with dragons began. I was out for my Sunday before supper walk. Near Miller's cave I came across something that looked like a big rock. But it was too round and smooth not hard enough to be a rock.

Carefully I rolled into the cave and went to fetch Pa. What do you think it is Pa? "An egg. A big egg," was all he said. "Now you stay away from that thing daughter. No telling what'll come out of it!" I could tell if Pa was more scared than worried. "You Just stay away, you hear me!" he

said, pointing a finger. I always minded my parents, never had a reason not to. And I tried to mind Pa now, but I could not stay away. Day after day I'd go to Miller's cave to wait and watch, and wonder: What is coming out of that egg? One night I couldn't sleep. I got out of my bed and climbed out of my window onto the perch Pa had made for me in the oak tree.

But a loud noise broke the stillness of the night. Crack! It was louder than one hundred firecrackers on the Fourth of July. CRACK! I heard it again, this time louder than before. It was coming from Miller's cave. At the first hint of dawn, I headed toward that sound. There in the corner of the cave, where I'd left it, was the egg. And pushing its way out, like I've seen so many

baby chicks do, was a tiny dragon poking through that shell with its snout. It was love at first sight. "Hey there, li'l feller, welcome to the world," I sang, soft and low. As I stroked his nose, a sweet little purring whimper came from him. As I touched skin to scale, I knew I was his girl and he was my dragon. I named him Hank. Hank was just a joy to have around. He was a fire-breathing dragon, and he made sure he kept his temper whenever I was near. Pa wouldn't have seen the sense or the use of having a dragon around who ate you out of house and home. Thankfully, Hank preferred fish, frogs, eels, and insects to beef, lamb, chicken, and pork. And he did have a healthy appetite! Ma never wanted to know about Hank. Whenever I wanted to talk about him, she'd cover her ears and sing. She said that having a dragon

around had to be worse than having a field full of critters. But it wasn't.

Ma and Pa taught me about caring for living creatures from the day I was born. They taught me about raising lots of things, but they never imagined I would someday care for a critter most folks don't even believe existed. It did take a little time, but whether they liked it or not, Hank was part of our lives. He was as awesome thing, Growing to be as big as the barn from tail to snout. Hank was very clumsy when his wings came in, But once e learned how to use them, we'd go flying mostly at night.

Up until then I had been afraid of the dark. The shadows had muffled noises and the complete

quiet stillness always seemed to be waiting and watching me. I had seen my farm up in my tree perch. But Hank showed me my world from on high, the way a cloud or a bird or a star just might be seeing me. Up there I saw things for what they were. And it was just grand!

Pa was the first one to notice what he called a strangeness happening around our farm. One morning with Samson, our mule, hitched for work, Pa set out to plow the fields. But all the work had been done. The ground was turned over and seeds had been sown. Pa was plumb flabbergasted! Hank and I tended the crops, too. We pulled weeds and kept varmints away. And Hank even got me to school before the first bell. Even after all the good he'd done, Ma still didn't want any part

of Hank. But when a hot spell hit, her tomatoes began to dry out. Hank hovered above them, fanning away the heat. He saved just about every last one of them. Ma didn't admit it, but she felt beholden to Hank. She began fixing fancy gourmet meals just for him - eel potpies, frog-leg pudding, and a fish-and-insect stew that Hank just loved.

Day by day Hank was getting bigger. Ma was uneasy about Hank's fire-breathing breath. Pa paced with worry about all the corn Hank and I had planted. There was corn growing everywhere. Ma cooked as much of it as she could, but there was too much. Just when it seemed like the corn would swallow up our farm, Hank grabbed Pa's shovel and dug a wide trench around the cornfield. Then he blew on it with his hot breath. "What in

tarnation?" Pa screamed. Ma ran out of the house carrying a bucket of water. But it was too late. The whole field was ablaze. We couldn't believe our ears -POP! POP!! Pop, Pop! POP- or our eyes.

Hank was making popcorn. It took an entire week to salt and bag it. We sold it all at a profit. It was the first dragon-popped popcorn anybody ever saw or tasted. Oh, it was real good, too. When Ma harvested her tomatoes, Nancy Akins bought some. She claimed they had medicinal value. She said they cured her gout. Pretty soon folks wanted dragon-grown food like they wanted medicine. But there was nothing medicinal about it. It was just Hank.



The crowds and attention decided his fate. One evening Ma and I were sitting in front of our potbellied stove. She was shelling peas while I read Murdoch's *Adventure Atlas of the Known and Unknown World*, a book I'd gotten from the library that morning. In that instant I realized what I needed to do. Come morning, Hank and I set out for the dragon-shaped landmass floating in the middle of the ocean.

There were dragons everywhere. They put us up in their best hotel, invited us to eat in their best restaurants. Hank felt right at home. When I saw Hank playing run-and-fly-and-chase, I knew he had found the perfect place to be. All in all, it was a great vacation.

But at the end, it got real hard: I had to say farewell to Hank. At least for now. Normally I don't get mushy at departing, but when Hank turned to me and called me Cupcake, I boohooed a heap. Just as I was about to board my plane, Hank stood there on the runway trying to hide a wheelbarrow behind his back. His toothy grin Jjt up that cloudy day. That wheelbarrow was full of. . . "ROCKS??" Ma squealed in puzzlement. "'Tain't rocks, Mother. They're eggs, dragon eggs!" I exclaimed. Pa beamed right proud. Each egg looked different from the rest: One glowed, one glistened, another one flickered, and one even sparkled. I stood admiring the lot of them. Looking at those eggs, I thought about my Hank. For now, he was out there somewhere in the world. I knew I'd see him again. Wondering when was the only

thing fixed in my mind. But in the meantime, I knew what I had to do. The same way Pa knew that farming was in his blood, I knew that raising dragons was in mine,

There are some things you just know.