

**TOM HOLT**



Evil is innocent, OK?

**PAINT YOUR  
DRAGON**

# PAINT YOUR DRAGON

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Tom Holt

## Chapter 1

Once upon a time, long ago and far away, there was a great battle between Good and Evil. Good was triumphant, and as a result Humanity has lived happily ever after.

But supposing Evil threw the fight...

And supposing Good cheated ...

He stepped off the plane into the belly of the snake; the long, winding tube thing they shove right up to the cabin door, so that newly arrived foreigners don't get a really close look at dear old England until they're through passport control and it's too late.

He didn't actually have a passport; but he explained at the barrier exactly why he didn't need one, and so they let him through. In answer to his polite enquiry, they told him, 'Britain'. They even urged him to have a nice day, which was rather like imploring petrol to burn.

Down the steps he went, into the baggage hail. The carousel was empty and the indicator board

expressed the that before. More to the point, that wonderful, dangerously attractive shape he was looking at had been significantly dead for thousands of years, ever since one George de la Croix (alias Dragon George Cody; better known to divinity as Saint George) had kebabbed it with a whacking great spear. One day, probably quite soon, he'd get another dragon body and look like that again; right now he was wearing a standard K-Mart two-leg, two-arm, pink hairless monkey costume — the equivalent of the cheap grey suit they give you when you're demobbed or let out of prison —and he wanted to see what he looked like in that. He turned to the next mirror along and saw a human male, powerfully built as humans go, medium height, longish dark hair and short, clipped beard with grey icing, and round yellow eyes with black slits for pupils.

Ah well, he thought. If you wear off the peg, you've got to take what you get. He was no expert in human fashions

— in his day, nearly all the humans he came across wore steel boiler-suits with helmets like coal scuffles, and that was a very long time ago. It would probably do, until he got the dragon outfit back. And then, of course, everything would be different anyway.

Once outside he raised a hand, whereupon a taxi drew up and opened its door. That was, in fact, a curious occurrence in itself, since the last thing the taxi driver could remember was turning left out of Regent Street and

swerve to avoid a right-hand-drive Maserati. He also had a notion that he'd had a passenger on board. Evidently not, for the cab was empty.

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'Where to?' the driver asked.

'Licensed premises,' he replied. Then he threw his bag onto the back seat and climbed in.

The driver, a Londoner, didn't actually know of any pubs in the Heathrow area, and confessed as much. His fare

replied that in that case, they could learn together. 'Just drive around,' he suggested, 'until we see something I like the look of.'

And so they did. They'd been cruising up and down lanes for maybe half an hour when he suddenly leaned forward, rapped on the glass and said, 'That one.'

'You're the boss.'

'Yes.'

Having explained to the driver exactly why he didn't actually owe him any money, he waved him goodbye, shouldered his bag and crunched up the path to the front door. The landlord of the George and Dragon was, at that precise moment, asleep in bed — it was ten past ten in the morning, and yesterday had been a late darts night — so

he was more than a little confused when, about one second after the doorknocker crashed down on its brass anvil, he found himself in the bar, fully dressed, shooting back the bolts.

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'Morning. You open?'

'I think so.'

'That's fine. Large whisky, please, no ice.'

The customer had a fine thirst on him; ten large whiskies, one after another, appeared to have no more effect than airgun pellets fired at the side of a battleship. Ah well, thought the landlord, obviously a very lucky man. 'Another?' he suggested.

'Please,' the customer replied. 'What's that one with the green and black label?' The landlord peered. 'Bourbon,' he replied, stating the brand name. 'A hundred and five proof,' he added. The customer smiled. 'Ah,' he said. 'That's what I call fire water. Make it a treble, and have one for yourself.' Just as the customer said it, the landlord realised how much he needed a drink at precisely that moment. He reworked the optic, mumbled 'Here's health,' and knocked back the glass, the contents of which did

to his head what Guy Fawkes wanted to do to Parliament. 'Good stuff,' he croaked. 'Not bad, I suppose,' replied the customer. 'Same again.' It occurred to the landlord that it

would only be polite to make a little conversation, and he asked the

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customer what line of business he was in. It seemed that he'd inadvertently made a joke, because the customer grinned. 'Let's see,' he replied. 'Let's say I'm a flier.'

'Pilot, you mean?' 'Sort of.' He felt in his top pocket, extracted a cigarette, drew on it heavily and exhaled. The smoke seemed to fill the bar.

'Civil or military?' the barman asked. 'Bit of both. What's that colourless stuff in the bottle with the red label?' 'Kirsch.' 'Treble of that, then, and next I'd like to try the other colourless stuff with the green label.' 'That's Polish vodka, that is. Hundred and forty per cent proof. Beats me,' the landlord went on, 'how

something can be a hundred and forty per cent anything. I thought a hundred per cent was the limit; you

know, like a hundred out of a hundred?' Not long afterwards, the customer got up, thanked the landlord, and left him musing on three points that were puzzling him. Probably because his head was still glowing from the bourbon, he couldn't quite get a handle on any of them.

One; how come the man who had just left had managed to put away roughly ninety-seven centilitres of spirits in ten minutes and still been able to breathe, let alone walk jauntily

out of the front door with no apparent impairment of his motor functions?

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Two; the reason he had given for not paying had been utterly convincing, fair and square, no problems whatsoever on that score, but what had it been, exactly?

Three; just how in hell had he been able to smoke for five minutes without actually lighting the cigarette?

Bianca Wilson had first made her mark on Norton Polytechnic when she suddenly stood up in the middle of a class and put her clothes on.

Ignoring the comments, she then stepped down off the platform, took possession of the vacant easel and proceeded to paint a breathtaking still life of three herrings and a typewriter ribbon. After that, there was no question of mucking about with application forms; not only was she in the class, she was its star pupil. When asked what had prompted her to make the change from model to practitioner, she replied that it was warmer and you didn't have to keep still.

Sculpture proved to be her true medium. She stripped away marble as if it was cellophane wrapping to reveal the always implicit statue beneath. Once she'd learned the basics of the craft, such as how to sharpen a chisel and the best way to avoid clouting your thumb, it was obvious that

there was nothing more that Norton Tech could teach her. Accordingly, she thanked them very much, gave up the day job by the simple but eloquent expedient of telling the office manager what he could do with it, and spent her last ten pounds on a ticket to London. She travelled, of course, in the guard's van; it had taken five porters, the conductor and three gullible Royal Marines to get her luggage on board, and the Spirit of World Peace had to make the journey with her left leg sticking out of the window.

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Small-town girl in the big city; well, so was Joan of Arc, not to mention Boadicea. A talent like Bianca's is always hard to keep hidden, particularly when its manifestations are ten feet high and weigh close to a ton and a half. It took the proprietor of the Herries Street Gallery, stepping off the train at Paddington, fifteen seconds to recognise true genius when he saw it, three quarters of an hour to hire a suitably heavy-duty lorry, and six weeks of humiliating negotiation to get Bianca's signature on a contract. The rest is art history, with cross-references to economics, accountancy and business studies.

Thus, when, about eighteen months later, Birmingham City Council was playing third time lucky with the design of the city's celebrated Victoria Square, and the Kawaguchiya Integrated Circuits people came across with a six-figure garden gnome fund, there was only one possible choice; provided she would agree to do it. For a very long fortnight she considered the offer; any subject she liked (except,



added the city fathers, World Peace, because you do tend to get just a wee bit carried away on that particular theme, and we need a bit of space in the square for buildings and stuff) and as long as she liked to do it in, all the rock she could handle plus, of course, the immense satisfaction of helping gild Europe's most fragrant lily. Could anybody refuse an offer like that? Apparently, yes.

The city fathers faxed Kawaguchiya Integrated Circuits, tactfully suggesting that the two in their original letter must have been a misprint for three. KIC, thinking wistfully of the sixty acres of Tyseley they'd set their hearts on, faxed back their confirmation. Bianca accepted.

After careful consideration, she had narrowed the choice of subjects down to two. One of them, she told the Council, was the Industrial Revolution raping Nature, with side friezes of captains of industry through the ages suffering appropriate torments in Hell. Did they want to hear the other choice? No, Ms Wilson, that'll do fine. No, the other one will be just splendid, whatever it turns out to be.

To their amazement and relief, it turned out to be Saint George and the Dragon. Nobody could guess why, least of all Bianca Wilson.

After leaving the pub, he strolled for a while along the quiet, winding road. He had much to think about.

Well, it sure was good to be back. The shape; well, it was limiting, not to mention uncomfortable and intrinsically silly, but he'd be rid of it soon enough and then he'd really be back. He swung the holdall by its handle, and smiled at the clanking of its contents.

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England; not that he'd seen very much of it, but probably enough for his purposes. Lots of trees, he observed. Haystacks. Fields of waving, sun-ripened corn. Thatched cottages. Perfect. It was a wonder the United Nations hadn't made them tie a label on it saying Highly Inflammable. A lorryload of straw bales chugged past him and he grinned.

He felt well. True, the actual fuel content in fermented liquor wasn't all that high, and he'd probably have done better in practical terms to have called in at a petrol station and taken a long swig from the pumps. But there was no point in going out of one's way to appear conspicuous, or at least not yet. Pretty soon he'd be so conspicuous they'd be offering him a Saturday job as a lighthouse. Patience, patience.

The summer breeze was warm on his back and he instinctively looked upwards. Good thermals, if he wasn't mistaken. On a lovely calm day like this it was horribly frustrating to be stuck on the ground. As if in sympathy, his shoulder-blades began to itch and he paused a while to scratch them against a gatepost.

While he was standing and looking at the sky, he became aware of an unusual noise; a bit like thunder, a bit like the roar of a food-processor in full cry, with a tantalising hint of movement and a dash of power. A moment later, two jet fighters swept across the sky, flying perhaps a trifle lower than regulations permitted. They were only visible for a second and a half at most, but in that time his exceptional eyes scanned them and reported every detail of their appearance and construction to a suddenly lovesick brain. True, he'd come across aircraft before, like the big fat lumbering thing he'd come in on — a huge flying metal slug, a parody of flight. These, though, were something else entirely. It was as if a man brought up in strict seclusion by elderly nuns had just wandered into the changing room at a top-flight fashion show. Yes, shouted every fibre of his being, I want one of those.

He concentrated and quite soon one of the fighters came back. At his subsequent court-martial, the pilot was unable to offer any explanation. The best he could come up with was that it was a sunny day, it looked like a nice place, and there was this friendly looking man in the road below wagging his thumb.

'Hi.'

The pilot pressed a button and the windshield slid back. 'Hello,' he replied. 'What...?'

'Nice machine you've got there.'

'Yes. Um...'

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'I particularly like the way it just sort of drops in on the ground. I always thought you had to find a flat open space and come in gradually.'

'Not any more,' replied the pilot. 'Vertical take-off and landing. Look—'

'Mind if I have a go?'

'Well, actually, it doesn't belong to me, so perhaps—'

'Ah, go on.'

'All right.'

There were, he noticed as he clambered into the cockpit, all sorts of knobs and levers and things which presumably made the thing go. Superfluous, of course, in his case. He applied his mind.

'Excuse me!'

He looked down at the pilot. 'Yes?'

'Before you take off,' shouted the pilot above the roar of the engines, 'put the windshield back up. Otherwise you'll be

blown—'

'Thanks, but no thanks. I get claustrophobic in confined spaces.' How true. How very, very true. 'Cheerio.'

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Then ... straight up in the air, no messing. This was something he could get used to. And to think, last time he'd been here the best the poor fools could do was stick feathers to their arms with beeswax and jump off cliffs. All credit to them, they'd certainly been busy.

As the slipstream clawed vainly at his face and the ground became a fast-moving blur far below him, he snuggled back in his seat, sighed with pure contentment and groped with his mind for the weapons systems.

Bianca was used to inspiration. Scarcely a day went by without some rare and splendid gift of the gods slipping in through the cat-flap of her mind and curling up, nose to tail-tip, in front of the radiator of her genius. It was getting to the stage where she couldn't walk past a stone-built building without seeing hundreds of enticing images peeping out at her from the heart of the masonry, like socks leering through the glass door of a tumble-drier.

The Birmingham job, though, was something else entirely. A terrible cliché, of course, to say the thing had taken on a life of its own, but that was about the strength of it. The further the work progressed — and she was amazed at

how far she'd got in such a short time — the less actual control she seemed to have. Not that the work was inferior — on the contrary, it was superb, if you liked naturalism in your sculpture. But it was odd, because neither Saint George nor his scaly chum were turning out anything like the way she'd imagined them. George, she couldn't help thinking, ought to be taller, more heroic, less — well, dumpy and middle aged. He should only have one chin, and that a sort of Kirk Douglas job, the kind of thing you could surround with sea and put a concert party on the end of. He certainly shouldn't have round little piggy eyes and a squadgy little mouth like two slugs mating. And as for the dragon...

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But, she had to admit, she did like the dragon. It had style. In fact, it had so much style you could bolt a wheel at each corner and give it an Italian name. It was graceful, attractive, dangerous; you could see the power in those tremendous muscles and hear the whistle of the wind in those amazingly broad, delicate wings. Above all, it made you think, if someone came up to you and offered to bet you money on the outcome of the fight, you wouldn't take George at anything less than seventy-five to one. The result had to be a foregone conclusion.

She said as much to her friend Mike one evening as he helped her with the tarpaulins. Mike nodded.

'I wouldn't want to have just sold George a life policy,' he

said. 'A single-premium annuity, yes. I think I'd be on pretty safe ground there. But straight life or accidental death cover, no.' 'Strange,' Bianca agreed. 'Do you think it might be symbolism?' 'Probably. What did you have in mind?' 'Well.' Bianca stood back and took a long, dispassionate look. 'There's all sorts of things it could be

symbolising, actually.' 'Such as?' 'Um. The ultimate futility of imperialism?' 'Nice try.' 'Um. Male violence towards women?' 'Could be. In which case, the male is definitely on a hiding to nothing, unless you chip off George's

moustache and beef the pectorals up a bit. Talking of his moustache, by the way, had you noticed the strong resemblance to Alf Garnett?' 'All right, then,' Bianca said. 'How about World Peace?'

'Ah,' said Mike, nodding. 'Silly of me not to have realised before.' Bianca sighed. 'You're right,' she said, 'it's definitely up the pictures. Here, help me get the sheet over it before I get too depressed.'

'Didn't say I didn't like it,' Mike replied, as a gust of wind turned the tarpaulin into a mainsail. 'I think it's absolutely amazing. It's just...' 'Yes. Quite.'

'How much more are you planning on doing to it?' 'I don't know,' Bianca replied pensively. 'Either I'm going to leave it pretty much as it is, or else I'm going to take a

sledgehammer to it first thing tomorrow morning. What do you think?’

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‘I think,’ said Mike, ‘that if you choose Plan B, I could use the chippings. There’d be enough to cover every driveway in the West Midlands.’

At that moment, the rogue Harrier jet that had been shooting cathedral-sized divots out of Salisbury Plain suddenly stopped in mid-air, stalled and fell into a spin, dropping out of the air like a shot bird.

Cuddled in the arms of a warm thermal, the dragon watched it fall and shrugged. He’d been wrong. Compared to his real shape, it was just a toy; fancy dress, a tin overcoat. As it hit the ground and exploded, he flicked his tail like a goldfish, rose and hovered over the swelling mushroom of smoke and fire. Ruddy dangerous, too, he added. One little bump on the ground and they blow up. Shit, I could have been inside that. Doesn’t bear thinking about.

He throttled back to a slow, exhilarating glide and began an inventory of his new shape. Neat. And gaudy too, which he liked. A little bit more gold wouldn’t have hurt and maybe a few more precious stones here and there; still, what did you expect from something that owed its original genesis to local government? But in terms of function, of efficiency and power-to-weight ratios, he couldn’t fault it. For a moment,



He almost wished there were other dragons in the world.  
He'd have enjoyed giving them the name of his tailor.

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When Bianca arrived on site the next morning, the tarpaulin was already off and Mike was struggling to fold it; in this wind, a bit like trying to cram the universe into a paper bag. He looked up and gave her a sad smile.

'I asked you to save me the chippings,' he said. 'Sorry?'

'That's all right. Next time.'

'No, sorry as in what the hell are you talking about.'

Mike frowned. 'The dragon,' he said, pointing. 'You came back last night and scrapped it. Quick work.'

'No I didn't,' Bianca said, pointing. 'It's still...' Gone.

When you're a dragon, sobering up can be a nasty experience.

The last of the Polish vodka burned off just as he was attempting a flamboyant triple loop, about seventy thousand feet above sea level, and sixty-nine thousand feet directly above the very pointy tips of some mountains. At that point, something nudged him in the ribs, gave him an unpleasant leer, and said, 'Hi, remember me?' It was Gravity.

Fortunately, he had sufficient height and enough of a

breeze to glide quite comfortably down onto a flat green stretch in the middle of the large human settlement he was presently overflying. As he made his approach, he noticed that his chosen landing strip was dotted with humans, all dressed in white and staring up at him, while around the edges of the field, crammed onto rows of wooden benches, were several thousand other humans, also staring. The dragon was puzzled for a moment. He didn't have a fly, so it couldn't be undone. Hadn't they ever seen a dragon before?

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Having felt for the wind, he put his wings back, stretched out his legs, turned into the breeze and dropped lightly down onto the turf, landing as delicately as a cat jumping up onto a cluttered mantelpiece. The white men had all run away, he observed, and the spectators — he assumed that was what they were doing; either that or they were some kind of jury — were trying to do the same, although they were finding it hard because they were all trying to do it at the same time. Some blue men were walking towards him with the slow, measured tread of people who feel they aren't being paid enough to die. He wished there was something he could do to put them at their ease. He was, however, a realist; the only thing he'd ever managed to do that helped human beings relax was to go away, and unless he could get to a gallon or so of strong drink, that wasn't among the available options.

Or maybe it was. The green area was divided from the

rows of benches by a thin wall of painted boards, with words on them; National Westminster Bank, Equity and Law and — he recognised that one

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— Bell's Whisky. That, if he wasn't mistaken, was one of the brands of fuel he'd taken on board at the pub. If they had its name written up on a hoarding, perhaps they had some about the place. It would do no harm to ask.

'Hello,' he said.

At once, the blue men stopped dead in their tracks, and began talking frantically to little rectangular boxes pinned to the collars of their coats. This puzzled the dragon at first, until he worked out that the boxes were some sort of pet, that his rather loud, booming voice had frightened them, and the blue men were comforting them with soothing words. The dragon rebuked himself for being inconsiderate and lowered his voice a little.

'Hello,' he repeated. 'I wonder if you could help me. Have you got any Bell's Whisky?'

Perhaps the little boxes didn't approve of whisky, because they needed even more calming down this time. Painfully aware that tact had never been his strong point, the dragon modulated his voice into a sort of low, syrupy hum, and beckoned to the nearest of the blue men.

'Excuse me,' he cooed. The blue man stared, until the

dragon was afraid his eyeballs would fall out of his head, assured his pet box that it was all right really, and took a few nervous steps forward. The dragon considered a friendly smile, but thought better of it. His friendly smiles, it had to be admitted, did rather tend to resemble an ivory-hunter's discount warehouse. It'd probably frighten the poor little box out of its wits.

'You talking to me?' said the blue man, in a rather quavery voice.

'Yes,' replied the dragon. 'Bell's Whisky. Is there any?'

'What you want whisky for?'

Softly, softly is all very well, but the dragon was beginning to get impatient. 'I'll give you three guesses,' he replied.

'Look, either you have or you haven't, it's not exactly a grey area.'

'I don't know,' the blue man replied. 'I'm a policeman, not a bartender.'

'I see. Would you know if you were a bartender?'

'I suppose so. Why?'

The dragon sighed. If it had had a fuel gauge, it would be well into the red zone by now, but even so the flames that inadvertently ensued were four feet long and hot enough to

melt titanium. 'Perhaps,' he said, observing that the policeman had gone ever such a funny colour, 'you'd be terribly sweet and go and fetch me a bartender, so that we can get this point cleared up once and for all.'

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'Um. Yes. Right.'

'Thank you ever so much.'

'Um. Don't mention it.'

'Hope the flames didn't frighten your box.'

The blue man backed away, turned and ran; and for a long time, the dragon sat quietly where he was, conserving his energy and watching the pigeons waddling about on the grass. The whole area was empty by now, except for two or three of the blue men, huddled behind benches at the very back. It dawned on the dragon that something was going on. He frowned. It was, he felt, a bit much. Back in the old days, the humans hadn't made this much fuss when he dropped in on cities demanding princesses to go, hold the onions.

You'd think, he reiterated to himself, they'd never seen a dragon before.

Hey!

Maybe they hadn't seen a dragon before.

Anything's possible. Perhaps, in this strange and rather down-at-heel century, dragons had become scarce. If this was a remote, out-of-the-way district (his exceptional eyes, scanning generally for a clue, picked out the name Old Trafford written on a board, but it didn't mean anything to him) then it was conceivable that he was the first dragon they'd ever set eyes on. Reviewed in that light, the behaviour of the humans made some sort of sense. Rewind that and let's think it through logically.

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Assume they've never actually seen a dragon. They will, nevertheless, have heard of dragons; everybody has. And, facing facts, he wasn't so naive as to imagine that what they'd heard was necessarily accurate. Humans, he knew, are funny buggers, delighting in the morbid and the sensational, eclectic in their selection of what to remember and what conveniently to forget. Quite likely, that was the case when it came to the popular image of dragons. If he knew humans, they'd ignore the ninety-nine per cent of its time a dragon spends aimlessly flying, basking in the high-level sunlight, chivvying rainclouds to where they're needed most and persuading winds to behave themselves. More likely than not, the perverse creatures would focus on the five per cent or less of its life a dragon spends at ground level, ridding the world of unwanted and troublesome armour fetishists and saving kings the trouble of finding husbands for superfluous younger daughters.

In which case ...

Damn.

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What a time, the dragon reflected ruefully, to run out of gas. Because any minute now, some macho nerd on a white charger is going to come galloping up through the gate with an overgrown cocktail stick under his arm, hell-bent on prodding me in the ribs. Normally, of course, this wouldn't pose any sort of problem; one sneeze, and all that's left is some fine grey ash and a pool of slowly cooling molten iron.

Without fuel, however, he was going to have to rely on teeth and fingernails, which was a pest because it was ever so easy to crack a molar on those silly iron hats they insisted on wearing, and if dragons really are scarce, chances are there's precious few competent serpentine dentists within convenient waddling distance.

What I need, muttered the dragon to himself, is a good stiff drink of kerosene. He turned his head slowly from side to side, dilated his nostrils and sniffed. Over there ...

At the back of the enclosure some tall iron gates swung open and four strange green vehicles rolled through. They were big, made of iron and fitted with long iron ribbons under their wheels — socks? go-anywhere doormats? — and when the dragon pricked up his exceptional ears, he heard a blue man by the gate shout to a colleague that it

was going to be all right, the tanks were here now.

Tanks.

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Yes, right, said the dragon to himself, tanks, I remember now. Big metal vessels used for the storage of liquids. At long last, here comes the Bell's Whisky. And there was me thinking they were out to get me.

Chapter 2

I can't,' Bianca protested, 'just have disappeared.'

Mike shrugged and made a pantomime of patting his pockets and poking about in Bianca's toolbag. 'Bee, love, it's a tad on the big side to have rolled away and fallen down a grating somewhere. Of course it's flaming well disappeared. Obviously, someone's pinched it.'

'Pinched a fifteen-foot-long statue of a dragon? Kids, maybe? Bored housewife who didn't know what came over her? Don't be so bloody stupid. It'd take a whole day just to saw it off the plinth.'

'True.' Mike peered down at the stone beneath Saint George's charger's hooves. 'And no saw marks, either. In fact, no marks of any kind. You know, this is downright peculiar.'

'Peculiar.' Bianca closed her mouth, which had fallen open.



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