The Reluctant Dragon

A Play for Young Audiences
Based on the story by Kenneth Grahame

Adapted for the stage by Jim Geisel

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STORY OF PLAY

Since its first appearance in 1898, Kenneth Grahame's "The Reluctant Dragon" has delighted both young and old alike. It's a tale of a lazy dragon who shows the townspeople that they shouldn't be prejudiced against dragons, or for that matter, people who are different. One early morning, on their way from the market, a mother and her young son pass the entrance to a dark cave where mysterious sounds are heard. They soon discover that a dragon has moved in, and the son, being rather sensible, decides to visit the new neighbor. The young boy determines that the dragon is a nice sort of fellow who enjoys tea parties and making up poems. The boy spends many a night with the dragon who tells him tales of long ago about knights and princesses. But their pleasant times are numbered. Down in the village, the townspeople start to gossip about the "wicked" beast and with St. George, the dragon slayer, they start to plan the dragon's destruction.

Performance time: About 45 minutes.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

"Footprints in the snow have been unfailing provokers of sentiment ever since snow was first a white wonder in this drab-colored world of ours. In a poetry book presented to one of us by an aunt, there was a poem by one Wordsworth in which they stood out strongly with a picture all to themselves, too -- but we didn't think very highly either of the poem or the sentiment. Footprints in the sand, now, were quite another matter, and we grasped Crusoe's attitude of mind much more easily than Wordsworth. Excitement and mystery, curiosity and suspense, these were the only sentiments that tracks, whether in sand or snow, were able to arouse in us."

Kenneth Grahame
Dream Days
1898

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2 m, 2 w, 1 flexible)

Actor One: Plays Kenneth and the Boy

Actor Two: Plays the Mother

Actor Three: Plays Charlotte and the Friend

Actor Four: Plays the Circus-Man and St. George

Actor Five: Plays the Reluctant Dragon

Optional Extras as Villagers

SETTING

The action of the play takes place on a hill in the Downs by a little English Village. The prologue and epilogue take place on an early winter evening, late 1890s. The Circus-Man's story of "The Reluctant Dragon" takes place a long time ago.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

"The Reluctant Dragon" first appeared in 1898, in a collection of short stories for children by Kenneth Grahame. The collection was entitled *Dream Days*. In keeping with the style of late Victorian vernacular, the adaptation maintains Grahame's original prose intact in many places. The prologue and epilogue, which is based on Grahame's original is optional. An alternative opening and ending to the play can be found in the appendix.

PROLOGUE

***For an alternative opening see the end of the playbook.*

(AT RISE: A snow-covered English hill, which is on a turntable, in the center of what was once a rolling glassy slope, now frozen dead by the winter's wind. It is a dreary, late afternoon, late 1890s. The landscape is lifeless and bleak. The sun has started to descend for the evening. There is a moment before the action starts that all we hear is the sound of the cold, winter wind. The dreariness is broken by the sound of children's laughter. KENNETH, a young boy dressed for winter, enters playing in the snow. He eagerly makes a "snowball," for he is engaged in a mock battle with his sister, CHARLOTTE, who enters and is at once hit by Kenneth's snowball.)

CHARLOTTE: That's not fair, Kenneth! You haven't given me time to prepare my ammunition.

KENNETH: When one is in battle, it's not wise to give your opponent any special favors, even if she's your sister.

CHARLOTTE: You just wait, Kenneth. I'll make the biggest snowball you'll ever see! Then, won't you be sorry. *(SHE scoops up some "snow" packing it into a ball, while KENNETH does the same. All of a sudden Charlotte stops, deeply interested in something she finds in the snow.)* Oh, look! Kenneth, come here!

KENNETH: This isn't a trick of combat, is it, Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE: Kenneth, I'm serious. There's the most interesting footprints in the snow. Come and see for yourself.

KENNETH: *(As he crosses to her.)* Probably some sort of bird, you know.

CHARLOTTE: No, it's not a bird!

KENNETH: You're right. They're too large for a bird to make. *(Studying them closely.)* Hmmm.

CHARLOTTE: *(Scornfully.)* Don't you know what kind of animal made these tracks? Thought you knew all the beasts that ever were.

KENNETH: Well, let's see. They could be polar bears, or penguins, or iguanodons, or maybe even walruses.

CHARLOTTE: No, they won't any of 'em quite do. Seems like something lizardy. Did you say an iguanodon? Might be that, perhaps. But that's not British, and we want a real British beast. I think it's a dragon!

KENNETH: *(Objecting.)* They're not big enough to be a dragon's!

CHARLOTTE: Well, all dragons must be small to begin with, like everything else. Perhaps this is a little dragon who's got lost. A little dragon would be rather nice to have. Let's track him down!

KENNETH: But he might scratch and spit. After all, a dragon is a beast, you know.

CHARLOTTE: It's just a little dragon. He couldn't do anything really. Please, won't you help me to track him down?

KENNETH: All right! Let's make an expedition. Something is sure to come of it.

CHARLOTTE: *(Pointing off stage left.)* They lead that way!

KENNETH: Are you sure? How do you know which is the heel and which is the toe? It all looks the same to me.

CHARLOTTE: Don't be silly. Of course that's the toe. So the beast is going that way.

(THEY track the footprints through the snow.)

KENNETH: They've disappeared.

CHARLOTTE: But he must be around here some place.

KENNETH: Admit it, Charlotte. You're just pretending to see dragon tracks.

CHARLOTTE: No, I'm not.

(CIRCUS-MAN, placidly smoking a pipe and wearing a large overcoat, strolls in.)

KENNETH: There's our friend, the Circus-Man! Let's ask him if he's seen any dragons.

(THEY run over to greet HIM.)

CIRCUS-MAN: Why, hello there my two frosty friends. What brings you up the hill?

CHARLOTTE: Please, sir, have you seen a beast lately?

CIRCUS-MAN: May I inquire, what particular sort of a beast you may happen to be looking for?

KENNETH: It's a lizardy sort of beast. Charlotte says it's a dragon, but she doesn't really know much about beasts.

CIRCUS-MAN: *(Looking slowly around.)* I don't think that I've seen a dragon in these parts recently. But if I come across one I'll know it belongs to you, and I'll have him taken round to you at once.

CHARLOTTE: Thank you very much, but don't trouble about it, please, 'cos perhaps it isn't a dragon after all. Only I thought I saw his little footprints in the snow, and we followed them, and then they disappeared. Maybe it's all a mistake, and thank you all the same.

CIRCUS-MAN: *(Cheerfully, trying to lift her spirits.)* Oh, no trouble at all. I should be only too pleased. But of course, as you say it may be a mistake. And it's getting dark, and he seems to have got away for the present, whatever he is. I'll tell you what, I've got the biggest Book of Beasts you ever saw. Some afternoon, you'll come and visit me for tea and we'll find your beast in it!

CHARLOTTE: Oh, that would be lovely!

KENNETH: *(Tugging at his SISTER.)* Come along, Charlotte, it's nearly six o'clock and you know Mother is waiting for us. And it's getting so dark and eerie.

CIRCUS-MAN: Here, I'm coming along with you. I want another pipe, and a walk will do me good.

CHARLOTTE: Oh, tell us a story as we go. Please, will you?

CIRCUS-MAN: *(Sighing heavily, only half-seriously.)* I knew it. I knew I should have to tell a story. Oh, why did I leave my pleasant fireside and venture outside? *(Seeing CHARLOTTE disappointed.)* Well, I will tell you a story. Only let me think a minute.

End of Freeview

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