

BBC

BOOKS



DOCTOR WHO

THE KING'S DRAGON

Una McCormack

Be careful what you wish for...

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also in the Doctor series from BBC Books

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Acknowledgements

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About the Book

'They called it Enamour. It turned minds, sold merchandise, and swayed elections. And it did its job far too well...'

In the city-state of Geath, the King lives in a golden hall, and the people want for nothing. Everyone is happy and everyone is rich. Or so it seems. When the Doctor, Amy and Rory look beneath the surface, they discover a city of secrets. In dark corners, strange creatures are stirring. At the heart of the hall, a great metal dragon oozes gold.

Then the Herald appears, demanding the return of her treasure ... And next come the gunships. The battle for possession of the treasure has begun, and only the Doctor and his friends can save the people of the city from being destroyed in the crossfire of an ancient civil war. But will the King surrender his new-found wealth? Or will he fight to keep it...?

A thrilling, all-new adventure featuring the Doctor, Amy and Rory, as played by Matt Smith, Karen Gillan and Arthur Darvill in the spectacular hit series from BBC Television.

About the Author

Una McCormack lives in Cambridge, where she reads, writes and teaches. She and her partner have no cats and many Daleks.

Also in the Doctor series from BBC Books

Apollo 23 by *Justin Richards*

Night of the Humans by *David Llewellyn*

The Forgotten Army by *Brian Minchin*

Nuclear Time by *Oli Smith*

The King's Dragon by *Una McCormack*

The Glamour Chase by *Gary Russell*

DOCTOR WHO

The King's Dragon

UNA McCORMACK

BBC
BOOKS

For Matthew, of course

*'Woe for that man who in harm and hatred hales his soul to
fiery embraces; nor favor nor change awaits he ever.'*
From *Beowulf* translated by Francis B. Gummere

They came only at night. They crept around the dark places, the hidden places, the poor and lonely places.

It was said in the city that you could tell when they approached. First your skin began to prickle and then a sickening cold fear lodged itself in your belly which rose and rose, up and up - until you could not speak and you could not breathe, and the lamp that you were carrying couldn't bear it any longer and went out - *phoomph!* And then the shadows grew thick and dark, and you could no longer see round the bend in the alley or the curve in the road. You could not see the peril that was lurking ahead, but it was there. And it lingered.

That's what was said. But when you asked the tale-bearer if he or she had seen these things themselves, 'Not I!' was the answer. But a cousin, or a cousin's friend, had heard the tale from someone else: 'A reputable source, mind you! My cousin is not one for telling tales!' And you would shake your head politely and reply, 'No, no! Of course!' But privately you would dismiss the story (again) and return to your business. For business was booming these days in Geath. All was well now that the city had its new young king.

Still, you might think, as you locked the doors, front and back, and you sealed up the windows, it was strange how empty the streets became after dusk. It was strange, too, how we all bolted our doors and our windows these days.

And each night, someone scurrying down a narrow alley or across a deserted plaza, on some business that sadly could not wait till the morning, would fancy that they could see shadows moving ahead, moving without any wind behind them, this summer being a hot one.

And some people - the most fanciful, surely, and the least trustworthy - would add a little colour to their tale. (For the best of us cannot resist a little colour.) There was a strange noise, they said, like the growl of a wild beast - and some would swear that on the wall of the passage curving ahead, they had seen the long shadow of a hand, or a claw, stretching out.

And the funny thing was, they would say, that this hand had too many fingers ...

Chapter 1

'I DON'T KNOW **why** I assumed an alien planet would be in the future,' Amy said, 'but I did. Flying cars. Rockets.'

'Food in pills,' Rory said.

'Food in pills, yes. But it's not like that at all. It's more ...'

'Olde worlde?' Rory offered.

'Olde worlde,' Amy agreed. 'But not retro.'

They were standing by the side of the road - an olde-worlde road, without flagstones and with mud. A few metres ahead of them, the Doctor stood with one thumb stuck out, his face screwed up in concentration. He was staring at a horse and cart that, for the past five minutes, had been making steady progress down the track towards them. The driver's attention, however, was focused no further forwards than the ears of his horse.

'If I'm being honest,' Rory said, 'I didn't expect horses. Is there any particular reason to expect horses? On an alien planet, I mean? Or have I missed something?'

Amy gave it a couple of moments' thought. 'I don't think you've missed anything.'

The front of the cart was now almost level with the Doctor. He stuck his thumb out further; the universe's most intense hitchhiker. Slowly, ever so slowly, the cart rolled past. The golden bells on the harness jingled merrily.

Amy gave the driver a cheerful salute as he went on his way. 'Why, Doctor!' she cried. 'Is there *anything* you can't do?'

For the merest fraction of a second, the Doctor remained stretched out in his hitchhiking pose. He looked like a slightly forlorn scarecrow, or a particularly scruffy stork.

Abruptly, he turned on his heel and rejoined his friends. His trousers and shirt were splattered in mud. Brightly, he said, 'Beautiful day! Let's walk!'

The day was very hot for walking so they set a gentle pace. The afternoon ambled amiably towards evening and the sun slipped away, although it did not take the heat with it. As the travellers neared the top of the next hill, a yellow moon put in an appearance.

'Are we there yet?' Amy called forward.

The Doctor, two steps ahead as ever, said, 'Not long now.'

'I hope this place is something special, Doctor,' Amy said. She glanced at Rory, trudging behind her, his expression murderous. 'For your sake.'

'Top of the hill! Then you'll see why I've brought you here.' The Doctor - all frantic energy and hectic delight - reached the top of the hill and balanced precariously on a gravelly escarpment, throwing his arms out like a showman.

'The city of Geath!' he cried. 'Revered throughout the universe for the beauty of its buildings, the wisdom of its people, the excellence of its sauces - and, most of all, for the unlikely fact that, for twelve and a half thousand years, it has been at peace with its neighbouring cities. Its name is a byword for hospitality, craftsmanship and civilised conversation. Forget rockets and flying cars and food in pills - Geath is something truly remarkable. A bunch of people who not only don't see the point of getting into

fights with each other, but have managed not to get into fights for about as long as it took your species to get all the way from hitting each other on the head with clubs to nuclear bombs ... Have I mentioned how good their sauces are?' He kissed the tips of his fingers. 'Nothing on your world comes close.'

Rory, struggling to keep his foothold on the stony slope, said, 'My nan makes good gravy.'

Amy's eyes went hazy with happy memory. 'Oh yes ...'

'If you can bring yourselves back for a moment to the *alien planet* you're standing on,' the Doctor said, 'and if you ever make it to the top of this hill, I promise you will see a sight capable of putting thought even of Sunday lunch out of your head.'

He reached out a hand, Amy took it, and reached back to Rory in turn. Together they took the last step up. The clouds in the sky parted and the light from the setting sun made the valley below them glow.

Amy gasped.

Rory said, 'Wow.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Exactly.'

In the valley below, a long river wound lazily in a great curve and, in this bend, lay the city of Geath. It dazzled. Amy blinked, to little effect, and was obliged to shield her eyes with her hand to be able to make out the shape of the city.

It spread up from the river onto hills that lay to the north in a grand display. It was as if the people of the city had no fear of showing their beautiful home to the wider world. In fact, they wanted everyone to see. And why not? It glowed in the sunset; the late light caught upon the red tiles of the roofs, the yellow buildings, the gold ...

As Amy looked more closely, she was able to pick out detail. The city was laid out in circles: concentric avenues running in rings that drew her eye to a central plaza.

There, in the heart of the city, stood a huge round building with a great domed roof.

The dome was golden. Amy reached out her hand as if to touch it. It was a marvel, smooth and round and precious, like the egg of a magical creature. Amy wanted to run her hand across its surface and feel the sun-tinged metal in her hand.

‘Like it?’ said the Doctor.

‘It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,’ Amy replied.

Rory, in a quiet awed voice, said, ‘What *is* that place?’

‘The council chamber,’ the Doctor said. ‘The heart of Geath, where its citizens meet to debate, discuss, deliberate - and eat.’ He checked his watch, tapped its face, then checked it again. ‘We should get a move on.’

Rory was already halfway down the hill. Amy half-ran and half-slid after him, eager for a proper look at the astonishing golden hall. Could it be as glorious up close? Could anything? Turning to look back, she saw the Doctor standing still on the hilltop, hands stuck in his pockets. Behind him, it was starting to get dark.

‘Come on!’ she called.

The Doctor nodded, as if coming to a decision, and followed her and Rory down the hill. They still had some way to go.

As she walked, it occurred to Amy that the driver of that cart had not shown much of the reputed hospitality. But it was hardly worth mentioning. No doubt they looked like a fairly odd bunch of hitchhikers. She couldn’t really blame him for passing them by.

The track down the hill and their new enthusiasm soon brought them to the broad paved road that led into Geath. They crossed the river by means of a great stone bridge. It was obviously ancient, but immaculately constructed; the massive blocks smooth and interlocking. The sun set, but

the evening remained hot, making the promise of the grand hall and a friendly welcome even more appealing. It was very quiet. Nobody passed them, walking or riding, in either direction.

Ten more minutes brought the travellers to an arched gate in the city walls. The walls were very high and the gate very locked. Behind them, everything was quiet. A single torch glowed dimly and they huddled under it.

'Have we got here after closing time?' Amy asked.

'Closing time? In Geath? No such thing.'

'A locked gate isn't very hospitable,' Rory said.

'No.' The Doctor looked thoughtfully at it. 'Odd, isn't it?'

'Maybe if we let them know we're here they'll be all smiles,' Amy said.

She reached for the hammer on the door. It was a fascinating design: it looked like a dragon, clambering up the gate, its head turned sideways so that a single ruby red eye could keep watch on the road leading up to the city. The dragon's long gold tail curled down to form the door-knocker. Amy picked up the tail - then dropped it, quickly.

'Doctor, it's warm!'

The Doctor unfurled a long finger and, tentatively, brushed the tip along the dragon's tail. 'So it is.'

Amy reached to take hold of it again but the Doctor was there first. She tutted in annoyance. Why couldn't she be the one to experiment for once? Out came the sonic screwdriver. Hadn't she seen it first? Amy watched unhappily as the Doctor ran his thumb down the scales on the dragon, almost caressing them.

'Definitely odd,' he said. Then he picked up the long tail and banged it hard against the gate.

There was a pause, a thump, and then somebody cursed inventively. The spy-hole in the gate opened.

The Doctor stuck his face up close and grinned through. 'Hello! How are you? Can we come in?'

'Who's there? What do you want?'

The Doctor fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his psychic paper. He held it up closer to the hole in the gate.

The keeper muttered a reply.

'Sorry,' the Doctor said. 'Having a bit of trouble hearing you! Big wooden gate in the way!'

'I said I can't read!'

'Ah.' The Doctor stared down at the paper. 'Of course. Oral culture. That's a design flaw, isn't it?'

There was another series of thumps from behind the gate, which then opened a crack.

'But the wife can,' said the gatekeeper. 'So you'd better come in.' He peered behind the Doctor and shook his head at Amy and Rory. 'Not them. Only you.'

The Doctor went through the gate, unapologetically looking back over his shoulder at his friends.

They stood there for almost two whole minutes before Amy muttered, 'Bored now!' She waved at Rory. 'Come on, then. Leg up.'

'What?'

'If they won't let me in through the gate, I'm going over the wall.'

'Amy, can't you wait for once?'

'Not a chance!'

'But what if they don't let the Doctor through? Then you'll be stuck in there—'

Patiently, Amy explained. 'No - I'll be on the inside and can come and open the gate once the keeper has gone back into his house. Hands, please.'

About three and a half seconds later, Rory was crouching with his hands clasped together in front of him. Amy was standing on them and scrabbling up the wall.

'Sometimes,' Rory said to Amy's left shin, 'I feel like I've spent my entire life doing things like this. And then I start to worry that I'm going to spend the rest of my life doing things like this ... Amy! That's my face you're standing on!'

'Nothing vital, then.'

'Thanks a lot!' He pushed her up, she pushed too - and then she was sitting on top of the wall. A sudden thought struck him. 'Amy - what do we do if the Doctor *does* persuade them to open the gate?'

'What?'

'There'll only be one of us. One of me! Here! By myself!'

Amy grinned down at him. 'You'll think of something. You usually do.' Then she swung over the wall and was gone.

Inevitably, the gate opened a split-second later. The Doctor breezed out with the gatekeeper scurrying behind him.

'No need to apologise! Easy mistake to make!' the Doctor said cheerily. Then he saw Rory, standing by himself, and frowned.

The gatekeeper tapped the Doctor's arm. 'Excuse me for asking, but I thought you said two companions?'

'So I did,' the Doctor replied.

'She ... got tired and went home,' Rory offered.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. 'You mentioned a carriage?' he said to the gatekeeper, as Rory came sheepishly through the gate.

'On its way,' the gatekeeper said. 'Don't want you wandering around the city at night, do we?'

'Don't we?' said the Doctor.

'Well, dark night, empty streets, you never know who's hanging around.'

The Doctor scratched his nose. 'Don't you?'

'Still, better than it used to be. Time was anyone could walk into Geath, any time, day or night! Can you believe it?'

He swung the gate closed. It gave a loud thump, as the Doctor said, softly, 'Why is that a bad thing?'

Amy slipped round to the back of the gatehouse. She could hear the Doctor speaking - quickly, so that the gatekeeper (and, presumably, his wife) didn't get much of a chance -

but she couldn't make out any words. Never mind. As long as the Doctor was talking, he'd be keeping them busy and away from her. She inched around the side of the house, coming to a halt near a window. Slowly, she leaned forwards to peer inside.

The room was crammed full of gold. The candlesticks were made of gold. The poker and fire-irons were made of gold. The door handle - yes, that looked a lot like gold. There was gold stitching on the curtains and on the cloth that covered the small table below the window upon which cutlery (gold) and plate (gold) were laid out. All of it gleamed in the candlelight. Two comfortable chairs stood facing each other companionably. Gold cushions rested plumply upon them. It was a tiny, very cosy treasure vault.

'What,' Amy muttered to the absent gatekeeper, 'is your scam, exactly?'

She tried the window. It opened. Carefully, still listening out for the conversation going on round the front of the building, Amy leaned inside, exactly far enough to be able to touch one of the spoons on the table. It too was warm. More than that, it was ...

Wriggling.

'Whoa!' Amy jerked back her hand. 'Now that is the most freakish thing in a whole world of freakishness!'

She was about to test it again, but the conversation at the front of the house was finishing. Quickly, she pulled the window down again and slipped back into the shadow of the wall.

The gate was open. Rory slunk in, tail between his legs.

'Poor Rory,' Amy whispered to him. 'I'm guessing you didn't think of something.'

She edged round to the road, keeping to the shadows. The Doctor was gabbling away, at the gatekeeper and his wife. Then a carriage pulled up. A golden carriage.