

Fanshen the Magic Bear



by Becky Sarah

illustrated by Dana Smith

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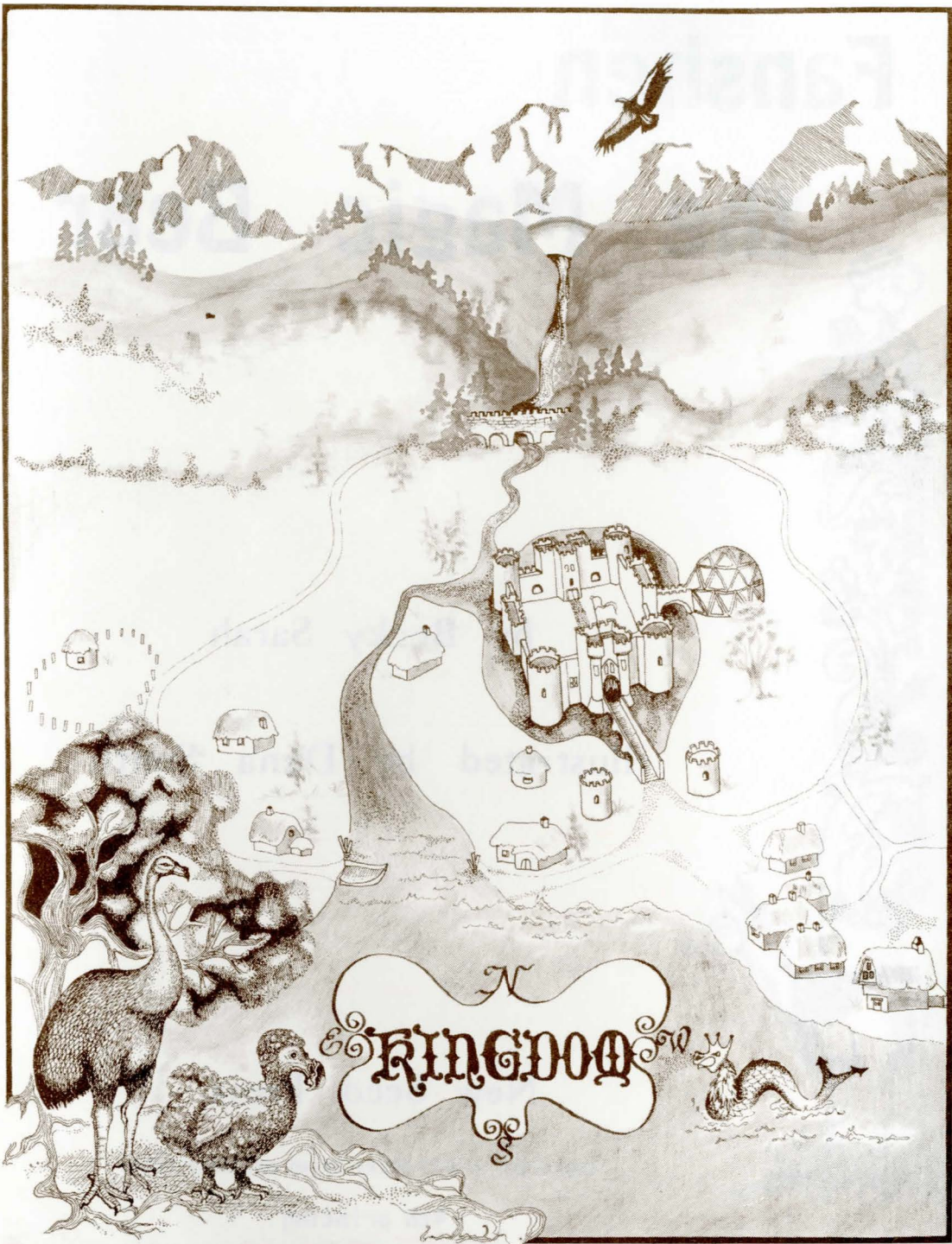
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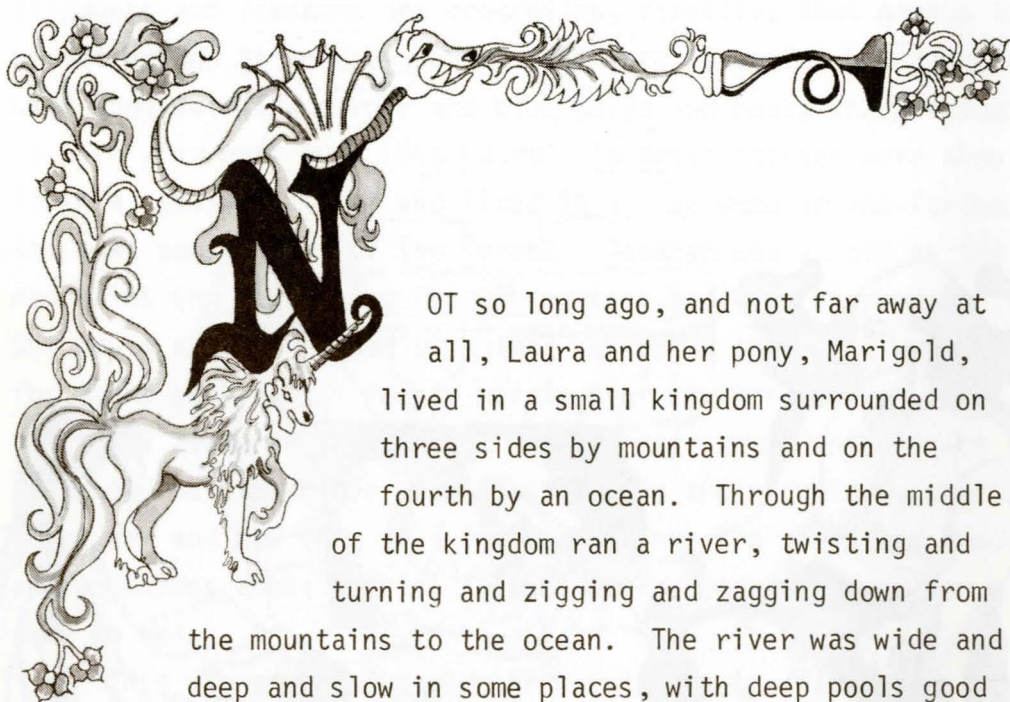


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NOT so long ago, and not far away at all, Laura and her pony, Marigold, lived in a small kingdom surrounded on three sides by mountains and on the fourth by an ocean. Through the middle of the kingdom ran a river, twisting and turning and zigging and zagging down from the mountains to the ocean. The river was wide and deep and slow in some places, with deep pools good for fishing and swimming and skipping stones and in other places there were narrow rough parts where the water ran fast and where if you threw a stick in, the current would carry it away before you blinked. There were two ways to cross the river. Deep in the dark and ancient forest where the water ran fast and furiously down from the mountains, was a bridge. And in the open land, not far from the castle, where the river was deep and wide, Molly the ferrywoman ran her ferry back and forth all day carrying people and animals from one side to the other. On the banks of the river, in the middle of the country, stood the king's castle. It was a huge and magnificent castle, because the king was very rich. He owned the whole country and Laura worked for him.



When Laura was a little girl, her grandfather used to tell her stories about the strange and wonderful and sometimes scary animals that lived in the mountains and in the woods at the foot of the mountains. There were deer, and giant turtles,

chipmunks and raccoons and crocodiles, fireflies that gave a light bright enough to read by, birds that were beautiful but dangerous, with long swirling purple and blue tails and beaks sharp enough to peck your eyes out. But Laura's favorite stories were about Fanshen, the magic bear who lived in a cave deep in the farthest and most secret part of the forest. Fanshen was as old as the mountains and remembered everything that had ever happened. She could speak in human or animal voices or she could be silent for years and years. People hardly ever saw her; there was no one still alive in the kingdom who had ever seen Fanshen face to face. But the older people still told their children stories about her and how once in a very long time when there was trouble and bad times among people, Fanshen would come down from her cave to help.

This story begins early one morning in the first days of a summer. Laura was riding along on her pony, Marigold. Laura's job was to collect rent from all the people in the kingdom, for the king. She had a list on which the king had written how much each person must give, either in food, or money, or animals, or wool from their sheep, or something they made. If they didn't have what was on the list, Laura had to take whatever she saw that the king might want. She felt bad about her job. She didn't like to take people's food, or money, or tools, or animals, but the king made her do it. He wouldn't even let her quit her job, and she was afraid of him.

The king lived in a huge high castle, some of it very old and some of it new, because the king had to keep on building on



new parts to hold all his money and possessions. The king was very rich and very lazy. It was all extremely nice for the king. He never did anything he didn't want to do; he just lived in his castle that was so big it would take all day to walk from one end to the other. He had lots of food, and things to play with, and a crown made of gold and diamonds and rubies, and he went on lots of trips and vacations, and had servants to pick up after him, and entertain him, and tell him stories, and play music for him. He didn't even have to make his own bed. But life wasn't very nice for



anyone else in the kingdom. The people had to work ALL the time, and then the king often took the things they made or the crops they grew. They didn't have enough food sometimes, or warm clothes in winter. And often at the end of the day they were too tired to tell their children bedtime stories, or tell jokes and play music together after dinner.

Laura visited all the homes, to collect rent for the king, so she knew about all this better than anyone else. She grew more and more worried and unhappy about how unfair things were. On the day when this story begins, she was on her way to the house of Homer the shoemaker, to collect his rent for the year. Homer had three little children who were playing in front of the house when Laura rode up.

"You must give me one small bag of gold," she told Homer, checking the list the king had made. Homer was sitting at his workbench, making a pair of boots for Molly, who ran the ferry back and forth across the river.

"But I don't have that much," Homer said.

"I can't help that," Laura told him firmly, but feeling a little sad. "That's what the king wants."

"Well, all I have is four pieces of gold and I need that to buy food for me and my children to eat."

Laura felt awful. She got down from Marigold and went over to Homer's workbench to talk. "Don't you really have any more than that?" she asked.

"No, I don't."

"Well, don't you have anything else you could give the king?"

"I guess," said Homer unhappily, "I guess I could give him my goat. But I'd rather not..."

Even though she didn't want to take the goat, Laura said determinedly, "You have to give something." She tied a rope around the goat's neck and led him away.



The next house Laura came to was Blake's. Blake lived by himself in a little cottage and kept a flock of sheep. He sheared wool from the sheep, spun it into yarn, and wove the yarn into cloth. He made his own clothes from some of the cloth and traded the rest to buy food and other things he needed. Blake had no gold at all to give Laura. But his sheep used a lot of land for grazing, and according to the king's list, he owed a large bag of gold.





"Well," said Laura cheerfully, "you can give me wool instead, then. The king likes to have lots of new clothes all the time, so he will gladly take wool instead of money." Laura was pleased that Blake could so easily give up something that the king would like.

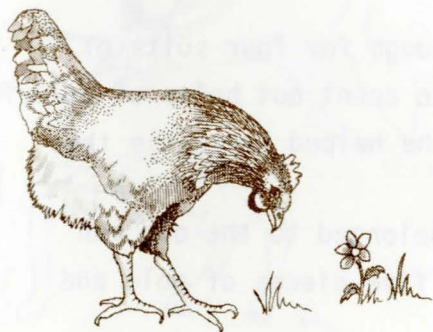
"But I need all the wool," Blake explained. "I'm going to trade some to the farmer over the hill for corn and potatoes this winter."

"The king will want at least enough for four suits of clothes," Laura said, as she began to count out bolts of colorful cloth. Blake looked very gloomy as he helped Laura tie the cloth onto Marigold's back.

The next house along the road belonged to the old man and the old woman. They gave Laura five pieces of gold and

a chicken. Even though they were sorry to be losing their gold and their chicken, the old man gave Marigold a carrot to eat and the old woman said to Laura, "I remember when you were a little girl, Laura. And now you are all grown up. Well, I bet you still like oatmeal cookies." She gave Laura a handful of oatmeal cookies to take with her.

Next, the road took Laura through the deepest part of the forest, where the trees were so tall that it made her dizzy to look up at them, and the ground, covered with pine needles and moss, was soft under Marigold's hooves. When they came to the bridge over the river, Laura and Marigold stopped to rest. Laura lay down on the grass and let Marigold wander around looking for something to eat. Laura thought about the king, and about her job. She liked riding around the country on her pony all day, but she knew she did not want to collect rent for the rich king anymore.



After a while, Laura dozed off to sleep, but she was aroused by small sounds like something moving in the grass. But there are always small sounds in a forest and the noise of the river was close by.

She looked around and there on the other side of the road was a huge brown bear, taller than a tall man, with long white sharp teeth, and little twinkly nice eyes, with big sharp curved claws and a beautiful shiny soft fur coat. The bear was looking



straight at Laura and her heart pounded like a drum. But she didn't exactly feel like running away and she noticed that Marigold didn't seem to be afraid; he was just standing quietly chomping the grass and watching the big brown bear.

Laura remembered the stories her grandfather used to tell her when she was little about Fanshen, the magic bear who was as old as the mountains and knew almost everything and lived in a cave in the dark and secret part of the forest.

"Good morning, Laura," said the bear, smiling, if bears can smile.

"Good morning, Fanshen," said Laura hesitantly. She was not yet certain that this was the magic bear.

Fanshen turned to Marigold. "Good morning, Marigold." The pony neighed and pawed at the grass with his forefoot.

"Good morning, chicken." The chicken cackled in reply.

"Good morning, goat." The goat nodded to Fanshen. His mouth was full.

Fanshen turned to Laura. "That's a fine looking goat you have there," she said.

"Oh," said Laura, "It's not my goat." She was not surprised to find herself talking to a bear, and she was not frightened anymore.

"It's not? Whose is it?"

"Homer the shoemaker's. I mean, it used to be his..."

"Did you steal the goat from him?"

"Oh, no, Homer gave it to me for the king. It's the king's goat now."

"That chicken looks like the one that the old man and the old woman used to have. Is that the king's now too?"

"Yes," said Laura.

"Well, what are you doing with all the king's things?"

"It's my job. I go around and collect rent from everybody for the king."

"You mean people give him these things as presents?"

"Well, no," said Laura. She was getting a little confused about it all herself. "You see, the king owns all the land. The people have to pay him for using it. They give their crops, or money, or animals, or whatever they have. And I take everything to his palace. Marigold helps me carry it all. Except, I don't like to do it. It makes me sad to take things away from people and give them to the king, especially when I have to take from people who have no extras and give to the king who is so rich already."

Fanshen turned to Marigold and asked, "Do you like your job, Marigold?" The pony shook his head and snorted in an angry way.

No one spoke for a moment. It was quiet except for the little sounds that are always there in a forest, the sound of the river and the small brushing noises of leaves moving in the breeze.

Fanshen said quietly, "Why don't you stop collecting the rent, Laura?"

Laura said, "Huh?"

"Just stop. Gather the people together and go to the king, everyone together, and tell him that no one wants to give up their money or supplies of any kind and you certainly don't want to collect them any longer."

"We couldn't do that!" Laura cried. But in the back of her mind she was already excited by the idea.

"Why not?"

"Well, maybe we could..." Laura looked at Marigold. His excitement was clear. His tail swished back and forth, and he tossed his head and snorted at her. Laura looked at Fanshen and saw that she was smiling, if bears can smile. The goat had already started off down the road back to Homer's place. Laura's eyes followed the goat as he trotted down the road. Suddenly she was sure.

"We'll do it!" she cried. She jumped on Marigold and



they galloped back the way they had come. Laura looked back once to wave goodby to Fanshen, but all she could see were shadows and dark shapes of the woods. She couldn't tell if one of them was Fanshen.

At Homer the shoemaker's house, she yelled, "Homer!" and he came running out.

"Homer! Your goat is coming back. In fact, I'm giving everyone's payment to the king back. There's not going to be any more rent."

Homer listened to Laura with a bewildered look on his face.

Laura said, "Get ready to go. We're all going to the palace together to tell the king that all the land in the kingdom isn't his anymore. We'll divide it up among everyone who lives here."

"We can't do that!" yelled Homer. He had never heard of such a plan.

"Why not?" Laura shouted back, feeling more sure of herself every minute.

"Well..." Homer wrinkled up his forehead, thinking. "Well, maybe...it sure would be nice to have my goat back. We'd all go together?"

"Yes."

"OK," said Homer, still just a bit uncertain. "You go ahead on your pony and tell everyone. I'll get the kids together and come after you."

Marigold seemed to be as excited as Laura, because he

ran faster than he ever had before. She leaned forward over his neck and the rough hairs of his mane whipped in the wind, stinging her cheek. In just a few minutes, they were at Blake's house. Marigold had a drink of water while Laura told Blake, "Blake, here's your wool back. Things are changing. We're all going together to the palace to tell the king we won't pay him rent anymore."

"But...but...we've always paid rent..."

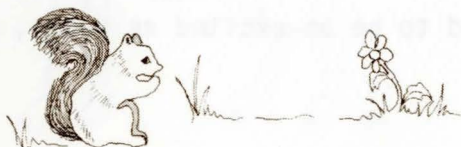
"Well, we won't anymore," said Laura. "Why should we all work and give him things, while he grows richer and richer and lazier and lazier?"

Blake scratched his chin. "I see what you mean," he said. "Let me pen my sheep so they won't wander off and I'll be right along behind you."

"Homer and his kids are coming down the road," Laura told him. "You come on with them. I'll go ahead and tell the others."

By the time they had been to every house in the kingdom, both Laura and Marigold were exhausted. But they hurried along to catch up with all the people on the road to the palace. Molly the ferrywoman was the last to join them because she had to keep on running the ferry until everyone was across the river.

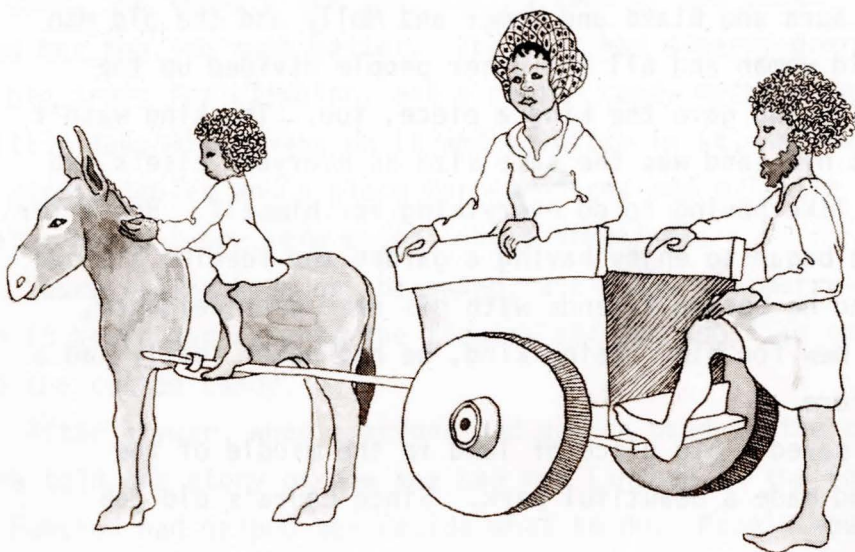
When the king looked out of his window and saw the huge crowd of people coming down the road, he didn't know what to think. And when he saw his own rent collector, Laura, leading



the crowd, he was even more surprised. The people gathered around the palace. The king wasn't sure what was going on, but he got dressed up in his fanciest clothes and went out on the balcony to talk to them.

Laura rode to the front of the crowd and looked up at the king. Now that they were at the palace she felt nervous again. Much to her surprise, when she opened her mouth to speak, her voice was loud and strong. "King," she said, "we have come to tell you that we will not pay rent anymore. You can't own all the land. It isn't fair."





"Not anymore," said Laura. "Each person is going to have his or her own piece of land. No one will pay rent to another person."

"But all the land is MINE!" The king shouted. His face was red and he pounded his fist on the railing of the balcony. But no one was frightened.

"You are wrong, king. Everyone in the kingdom is here, and we all agree that we want to divide the land among everyone." All around her the people were cheering and smiling. Laura wondered why she had ever been afraid.

The king was very angry, but he realized that the people had made up their minds and there was nothing he could do. He went back into the castle to pout and think things over.

So, Laura and Blake and Homer and Molly and the old man and the old woman and all the other people divided up the land equally and gave the king a piece, too. The king wasn't happy that his land was the same size as everyone else's and he didn't like having to do everything for himself. But after a while he began to enjoy having a garden and feeding his own horse. And he became friends with his next door neighbor, which was new for him. Being king, he had never really had a friend before.

They saved a big piece of land in the middle of the kingdom and made a beautiful park. Since Laura's old job



was gone, she chose a new job: taking care of the park. She liked her new job much better. The park had a merry-go-round, and big trees for climbing, and a cotton candy machine, and a little lake with swans on it and goldfish in it, and swings and picnic tables and a place for campfires and a little theater where there were puppet shows sometimes.

Laura pushed kids on the swing, and fixed the merry-go-round when it broke and watered the flowers and fed the fish and made the cotton candy.

After a year, when everyone had gotten used to the change, Laura told the story of how she had met Fanshen in the forest and Fanshen had helped her decide what to do. People would sit around in the park in the evening and talk and think and listen to music and wonder if or when someone would see Fanshen again. Children would go into the woods where the bridge was and look around and listen carefully and wait quietly for a long time, hoping, but so far Fanshen has not come back.



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