

St. George and the Dragon

The king of Selene, a city in Libya, had one daughter, named Cleodolinda. Cleodolinda was a sweet maid—moving gently and thinking gentle thoughts. Her form was fair, her eyes were clear and lustrous, and her heart was pure. She was as sweet as a summer morning and as brave as a winter sun. Wherever she went, she was welcome, for she carried joy with her. It seemed as if the earth were fairer where her shadow fell. The king loved this princess with a love that filled his whole heart with gladness. He knew her thoughts, felt her emotions, and shared her griefs. She was dearer to him than aught else in the world.

When Cleodolinda was fourteen years of age, the king thought he had never seen anything more beautiful than she. On that day he said to one of his courtiers, "Of all men on earth, I am most happy. My country is at peace, the queen, my consort, is amiable, and my daughter is as fair as she is good. I have nothing left to desire."

The courtier replied, "Sire, so gracious a monarch deserves only happiness."

But as the words were spoken a shadow fell, none knew from whence, and encircled the king. That night, as the watchman went round the walls of Selene, he felt upon the air a most poisonous vapor that came over the walls. It seemed to him that it came from without the city walls, where lay bogs and marshes and damp grounds. And even as he wondered, the fumes of the poison became too much for him, and he fell over and in a little time expired.

In the morning another watchman, making his round, found his fellow watchman dead beside the city wall, and upon the air was a faint odor that was unpleasant to the nostrils. Then the watchman scaled the wall, and, having glanced over, he perceived a huge beast which crawled away from the city and toward the marshes. As it crawled it flapped two great black wings, and from its nostrils belched out a black flame, which contained those poisonous fumes of which the watchman felt the trace. Its body was covered with scales so strong and smooth that they were like a knight's armor. In shape it was half crawling beast, half loathsome bird. As the watchman observed it, the dragon crawled into the farther part of the marshes and lay still.

Then the watchman hurried to those in authority to report this affair. When the matter came to the king's ears, he was greatly disturbed, for he remembered the shadow that had fallen upon him, and he was filled with fears. Yet the fears were not for his own safety. He gave orders that none should go outside the city walls until the dragon had gone back to whence it came.

So the long day through no man went outside the city walls, but many adventurous persons, having perched upon the walls, observed the dragon, which had come into the sunlight, and could be seen lying there. In the evening they saw the dragon wake, and rolling over its loathsome body, start to crawl toward the city. It crawled on four twisted feet and pushed itself with its wings, and its eyes shone like red flames. As this vile creature



approached, the people were afraid and retreated into the city, for they knew not for what purpose the dragon came.

When it had reached the gates of the city, it took up a position close to them, and from its nostrils it poured terrible fumes, so that the people were about to die from them. Then the king called together his knights, and one, who was braver than any other, declared that he would discover from the dragon its purpose in so haunting the city. Having entreated the dragon to cease casting out its poison while he spoke with it, he approached and asked for what purpose it had come to the gates of Selene.

The dragon replied, by signs and hoarse noises, that it would only depart from the city gates and cease troubling the people of Selene if it were granted a meal of two sheep a day.

When the king heard of this reply, he ordered that two sheep should be set aside every day for the dragon and put without the city walls. When the dragon had on that day received two sheep, it devoured them and crawled back to its lair.

It remained in the marshes and not far from the city, so that none might enter the city or come out of it for fear of the dragon. And every day it rose and crawled to the gates to receive its meal of two sheep.

After a time the sheep became few in number, so that there would not long be enough to feed the dragon, and the people were possessed with fear.

Then came to the king the bravest knights of Selene, praying him that he would allow them to go out and do battle with the dragon.

"For the sheep are few in number," said they, "and what is to be the fate of the people of Selene when they have nothing with which to feed the dragon?"

The king replied, "My brave knights, I fear me that ye go to your deaths. Yet can I neither forbid nor dissuade ye, for the fate of my people lies heavy on my heart."

Having so spoken he became silent, for the foreboding was upon him that darker trouble was to come upon the people of Selene.

Then went out the knights to do battle with the dragon. And when it saw them issue from the city gates, it forsook its lair and ran toward them with a most incredible speed, resting partly upon its body and partly upon its wings. And, having come near, it fell upon them, breathing out its terrible poison, and lashing them with its wings. Since the knights could neither pierce the scales with which its body was covered nor stun the creature with the hardest blow, they were speedily overcome by the fumes that emanated from it. And they perished, one and all.

Then there was weeping in Selene for the fate of the bravest of her knights. And while the people wept, they trembled, for the sheep that remained were few.

When there was no longer even one sheep to offer to the dragon, it lay again by the city gates and threw its poison into the city. The king, moving as one moves in an evil dream, facing a horror only half understood, went to the gates of the city and called upon the dragon to cease its poison for a time since he would talk with it. He asked it why it had come to torment the people of Selene. But to that the dragon would answer nothing.

Then said the king, "Our sheep are all finished, and indeed there is little food of any kind in Selene. Since this be so, wilt not thou leave our gates and return to thine own place?"

But the dragon, lifting its loathly head, made answer, by signs and noises, "I will not return to it. Let me be granted one child a day for my meal, and I will not molest the people of Selene." And it would say no more.

Then the king went back the way he had come, and he walked heavily, for in his breast his heart was turned to stone. He was filled with one great fear.

Cried the people of Selene: "We no longer care to live since our children are to be taken from us!"

Nevertheless, because the poison from the dragon was reaching everywhere, so that none could escape, they promised, with bitter weeping, to offer up one child a day, hoping that the dragon would return to its home ere all the children were devoured.

And every day lots were cast. And upon whom fell the lot, a child of his was delivered to the dragon. Any child was sacrificed was not yet fifteen years of age.

The princess Cleodolinda was aged fourteen. Every day her eyes were dim with tears for the child who was that day sacrificed. But her father, the king, never wept. His eyes were dry and his face pale. For his heart contained but one fear.

Then came a day when the lot fell upon the princess Cleodolinda, and she must be delivered to the dragon.

The king's fear was fulfilled, yet he could not weep. And flinging out his hands he cried, "The princess shall not be sacrificed! I will yield to ye everything, my wealth, my possessions, myself – but not my daughter."

But the people replied, yet without anger, "Have not we yielded our children, whom we loved? Shalt thou do less than we, O king?" And the king could not answer.

But after a while he said, "Ye will grant to me eight days to mourn for her and to learn by heart her beauty, for I have loved her passing well."

The people replied, "We will sacrifice our own children for eight days."

Thus for eight days the king mourned his daughter Cleodolinda, whom he loved beyond aught else in the world, and the people mourned with him, for she was well beloved. But the princess would not weep. For she said, "I am ashamed to weep for myself, I who am a king's daughter. I die gladly for the people of Selene."

When the eight days were over, women clad the princess in white garments, and she was placed outside the city wall to await the coming of the dragon.

To still her heart's loud beating, she crossed her hands upon her breast. To keep her eyes from wavering, she bent them upon the ground. She thought of the people of Selene, for whom she was to die.

Now she had been standing thus but a short time, when she heard upon the ground the noise of a horse's hoofs and looked up to see who it was that approached so near to the city of Selene. Having looked, her heart was filled with fear, for she beheld a knight of a fairer presence than any she had seen and of a wondrous gentleness. She perceived that he knew not of the dragon.

This knight was a soldier of the Emperor Diocletian, one who had risen to high honor in the army and who was passing through Libya to join his men. When he perceived the princess, standing pale and trembling outside the walls of the city, he paused on his way, to ask what was her distress.

But the princess, in a great agitation, replied, "Ah, sir, do not wait to question me, but press on thy way! For know, in yon marshes lurks a fearful dragon that has been the death of many a noble knight. Press on, I beseech thee, ere it issue from its lair."

But the knight replied: "I cannot press on and leave thee unprotected against the dragon."

And at that moment the dragon bestirred itself and began to crawl from its hiding-place.

"Alas," cried Cleodolinda, "the dragon is upon us! I beseech thee, Sir Knight, leave me before it be too late!"

But the knight, turning him about, bade her remain where she was and went out to meet the dragon.

When it observed him approach, the beast was struck with amazement, and, having paused for but a moment, it ran toward the knight with a great swiftness, beating its dark wings upon the ground as it ran. When it drew near to him, it puffed out from its nostrils a smoke so dense that the knight was enveloped in it as in a cloud and darted hot flames from its eyes. Rearing its horrid body, it beat against the knight, dealing him fearful blows, but he, bending, thrust his spear against it, caught the blows upon his shield.

And having cast all his strength into it, he dealt the dragon a deadly thrust. But the spear glanced aside, for the scales of the beast were like steel plates and withstood the blow. Then the dragon, infuriated by the thrust, lashed itself against the knight and his horse, and threw out a vapor deadlier than before and cast lightnings upon him from its eyes. And it writhed, an evil thing, about him, so that one would have said he must have been crushed; and wherever the knight thrust at it, that part was as if it had been clad in mail.

The fight lasted a long time, and the knight grew weary, though he fought with as great an ardor as at first. Through the deadly fumes that issued from the dragon the princess could see his face shine out, and she saw that it was pale, yet lighted up by some radiance that shone from within. As he thrust at the dragon, this radiance grew greater, so that at last it was like the light of the sun.

But the dragon looped itself about the knight, and its poison was heavy upon him, so that to breathe was almost more pain than he could bear. Then he perceived that, no matter how the dragon writhed, it sought always to protect one place in its body—that place which lay beneath its left wing. And, nerving himself for a great blow, the knight bent himself downward and thrust his spear with a turn into that place.

So great was the strength required for the thrust that the knight left the spear in the wound for weariness, and as he raised himself, he felt the dragon's clasp upon him loosen. Then the smoke ceased to belch from its nostrils, and the great beast fell to the ground.



Perceiving that the dragon was now helpless, though not dead, the knight called joyfully to the princess, and he bade her that she should loosen her belt and give it to him. When this was done, the knight bound it about the neck of the dragon and gave the girdle-ends into the hand of the princess that she might lead the dragon toward the city.

Thereafter, when they had reached the city gates, these were opened to them with great joy by the people of Selene, who had watched from the city this great fight. All were astonished to behold the loathsome dragon so guided by the princess.

With his sword, and in the presence of all people, the knight dispatched the dragon. When this was done, he would have gone on his way.

But the king said, "What shall be given to this brave knight, who hath so rid us of our enemy and hath restored to us the princess Cleodolinda and saved our children?"

And the people cried of honors and wealth that should be given to the knight.

But he, when all had finished, thus replied, "I desire only that ye believe in the God who strengthened my hand to gain this victory and be baptized." And when he had baptized the city into the Christian faith, he went on his way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- St. George lived during the days of the Roman Empire and is said to have died in 303 A.D. Yet in the story you have just read, he appears as a medieval knight, epitomizing all the ideals of chivalry. Medieval storytellers had no idea what life was like before their time, and often put anachronisms into the ancient stories they retold. What are some anachronisms you can find in this story? Explain.
- Is this dragon a typical portrayal of such a creature? What is different? Explain.
- What is romanticized about this story? (*Romanticized* can also mean "unrealistic.") Explain.
- Medieval Christians associated dragons with the devil, based on references from the book of Revelation. Keeping this in mind, how is the defeat of the dragon at the hands of St. George metaphorical? Explain.
- St. George, based on this legend, became the ideal knight of legend and even the patron saint of England. How is he an ideal knight? Explain.
- After this episode, St. George visits Emperor Diocletian, who has begun to persecute Christians within the Roman Empire. St. George pleads the Christians' case, and for this, the Emperor has him tortured by having a large rock placed upon his chest until he renounces Christianity. Still George will not renounce his faith, and the Emperor has him beheaded. Which makes George more worthy of sainthood—his battle with the dragon or this later episode? Explain.
- How do you think a medieval person would answer this same question? Explain.