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Nicholas and the Dragon
By Barbara Hamburger

Once upon a time when giants, fairies and dragons roamed throughout the land, there lived a king who was known for his great wealth. He was a powerful nobleman whose estate extended for miles around a splendid castle.

The castle was surrounded by thick walls and towers, for it was also a time of invasions and great wars. The gateway to the castle was reached by a high, narrow drawbridge that crossed a deep moat. Whenever an enemy threatened the castle, the knight at the gate would ring a bell and the bridge was drawn up so that no one could come across the moat.

Inside the castle lived the king, the queen, their beautiful daughter, the princess Penelope, the lords and ladies of the court, magistrates, retainers, servants, and an army of knights. Whenever any one of the knights fought a battle and won a great victory, he asked the king for the hand of the princess Penelope in marriage.

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The princess Penelope was not only beautiful but had a mind of her own. Her heart was set on a young squire named Nicholas, a handsome lad of sharp mind but who was too far beneath her in station to ever become her husband.

Now, there came a time when a fierce dragon invaded the king's lands. The beast delighted in raging around the forests and mountain valleys terrifying rich and poor alike. Even in its quietest moments the dragon was dreaded, for then he sat on the highest mountain peak roaring and rolling huge boulders down upon the houses, pastures and people. Try as they might to kill or capture the dragon neither weapons nor prayers could subdue the monstrous creature.

At last, the people gathered together to ask the king for his help. The king, who always took a kindly interest in his subjects, agreed to send his knights to rid the country of this terrible pest. At sunrise, on the following day, the king assembled his army in the great hall. "Who ever kills or captures the dragon shall have my daughter's hand in marriage,"

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proclaimed the king. "But someone must stay behind and guard the gateway to the castle. I have chosen you, Nicholas." Nicholas bit his lip and turned his head so the others could not see his disappointment. The king handed Nicholas the key to the gate and said, "I entrust you with the safety of the castle and all within its walls." "My lord," bowed Nicholas, "I shall do as you command."

Then the king, dressed in full armor, mounted his favorite battle-steed and led his army through the open gates. Nicholas gazed after them. He locked the gate and took his place on guard.

No sooner had the last knight disappeared into the forest when a shadowy figure in a black cloak appeared at the end of the drawbridge. "Won't you open the gate?" called a voice. Nicholas saw an old man waving to him. "The castle is closed today, sir," he answered. "You should be ashamed," taunted the old man. "A strong lad like you staying here while your king and his army are battling the dragon. Look, I have brought you a sword that not even the fiercest beast can stand against." As he said this, he withdrew a gleaming sword encrusted with

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precious jewels from under his cloak. "Take this sword. It will make you the greatest knight in the kingdom." Awed by the beautiful sword and these mysterious words, Nicholas thought of the princess Penelope but honor-bound by his oath to the king, he said, "I should like to go, sir, but I have pledged to guard the gateway to the castle and I am bound by my word."

When the old man saw he could not entice Nicholas away from his post, he threw off his cloak. As he did so, he began to grow bigger and bigger. Four paws with sharp claws appeared to support an immense body covered with red and green scales. A yellow tail ending in a black bristle and tufted hairs coiled over the dragon's head. Its mouth was filled with sharp teeth and fangs.

"What devil is this?" cried Nicholas who wondered how he could subdue such a monster. Frightened as he was, he did not draw back. He struck the great bell for the servants inside the castle to pull up the chains of the drawbridge.

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Suddenly, he felt a strange twitching in his pocket. Reaching inside, he drew out a large lump of crystal. Seizing it, he threw it straight at the beast. It struck him in the middle of his forehead. A blood-curdling howl came from the dragon. Turning, it raced away never to be seen again.

And so it was that Nicholas was hailed throughout the land as a hero. The king proclaimed him first knight of the realm and the very next day, Princess Penelope and Sir Nicholas were married. They lived happily ever after on a great estate filled with many treasures.

The End.