

THE PRINCE & THE DRAGON

by MELINDA REINICKE

There was once a great and noble King whose land was terrorized by a crafty dragon. Like a massive bird of prey the scaly beast delighted in ravaging villages with his fiery breath. Hapless victims ran from their burning homes only to be snatched into the dragon's jaws or talons. Those devoured instantly were deemed more fortunate than those carried back to the creature's lair to be devoured at the dragon's leisure. The King led his sons and knights in many valiant battles against the serpent. Each time they wounded the dragon and he retreated to his hidden lair deep in the mountains. While he healed, the kingdom would be at peace for a time. "Take courage," the King told his people. "One day the dragon will be slain."

Riding alone in the forest during a period of calm, one of the King's sons heard his name purred low and soft. In the shadows of the ferns and trees, curled among the boulders, lay the dragon. The creature's heavy lidded eyes fastened on the prince, and the reptilian mouth stretched into a friendly smile. "Don't be alarmed," said the dragon as gray wisps of smoke rose lazily from his nostrils. "I am not what your father thinks."

"What are you, then?" asked the prince, warily drawing his sword as he kept his fearful horse from bolting by pulling in the reins.

"I am pleasure," said the dragon. "Ride on my back and you will experience more than you ever imagined. Come now. I have no harmful intentions. I seek a friend, someone to share flights with me. Have you never dreamed of flying? Never longed to soar in the clouds?" The sunlight glistened with an iridescent sheen on the dragon's metallic green scales. "Bring your sword for security if you wish, but I give my word no harm will come to you."

Visions of soaring high above the forested hills drew the prince hesitantly from his horse. The dragon unfurled one great webbed wing to serve as a ramp to his ridged back. Between the spiny projections the prince found a secure seat. Then the creature's powerful wings snapped twice and launched them into the sky. Once aloft the dragon wafted effortlessly on the wind streams.

The prince's apprehension melted into awe and exhilaration. From then on, he met the dragon often, but secretly, for how could he tell his father, brothers, or the knights that he had befriended the enemy? The prince felt separate from them all. Their concerns were no longer his



After falling under the sway of a destructive dragon, a prince struggles to break free.

concerns. Even when he wasn't with the dragon he spent less time with those he loved and more time alone.

The skin on the prince's legs became calloused from gripping the ridged back of the dragon, and his hands grew rough and hardened. He began wearing gloves to hide the malady. After many nights of riding, he discovered scales growing on the backs of his hands as well. With dread he realized his fate were he to continue, and so he resolved to return no more to the dragon.

But, after a fortnight, he again sought out the dragon, having been tortured with desire. And so it transpired many times over. No matter what his determination, the prince eventually found himself pulled back, as if by the cords of an invisible web. Silently, patiently, the dragon always waited.

One cold, moonless night their excursion became a foray against a sleeping village. Torching the thatched roofs with fiery blasts from his nostrils, the dragon roared with delight when terrified victims fled from their burning homes. Swooping in, the serpent belched again and flames engulfed a cluster of screaming villagers. The prince closed his eyes tightly in an attempt to shut out the carnage, but the agonized cries and smell of burning flesh assailed him. The dragon's long neck snaked and spasmed as he crunched bone and devoured his roasted prey. The prince retched and clung miserably to his spiny perch.

In the predawn hours, when the prince crept back from his dragon trysts, the road outside his father's castle usually remained empty. But, not tonight. Terrified refugees streamed into the protective walls of the castle. The prince walked among bedraggled women carrying wailing children with gashes from the dragon's talons. Some victims, too badly wounded or burned to walk, were brought in carts or dragged on makeshift pallets.

The prince's heart was torn. Their pain brought tears to his eyes and shame to his soul. "What have I become?" he asked himself. At that moment, he wanted even more desperately to be free of the dragon. Perhaps his father, in all his wisdom, could help. But the prince feared that the truth would make him abhorrent in his father's sight. Surely he would be disowned, exiled, or perhaps even condemned to death.

The castle bustled with frantic activity to care for the refugees thronged in the courtyard. The prince attempted to slip through the crowd to close himself in his chambers,

but some of the survivors stared and pointed toward him.

"He was there," one woman cried out, "I saw him on the back of the dragon." Others nodded their heads in angry agreement. Horrified, the prince saw that his father, the King, was in the courtyard holding a bleeding child in his arms. The King's face mirrored the agony of his people as his eyes found the prince's. The son fled, hoping to escape into the night, but the guards apprehended him as if he were a common thief. They brought him to the great hall where his father sat solemnly on the throne. The people on every side railed against the prince.

"Banish him!" he heard one of his own brothers angrily cry out.

"Flay him!"

"Burn him alive!" other voices shouted.

As the King rose from his throne, bloodstains from the wounded shone darkly on his royal robes. The crowd fell silent in expectation of his decree. The prince, who could not bear to look into his father's face, stared at the flagstones of the floor.

"Take off your gloves and your tunic," the King commanded. The prince obeyed slowly, dreading to have his metamorphosis uncovered before the kingdom. Was his shame not already great enough? He had hoped for a quick death without further humiliation. Sounds of revulsion rippled through the crowd at the sight of the prince's thick, scaled skin and the ridge growing along his spine.

The King strode toward his son and the prince steeled himself, fully expecting a back-handed blow even though he had never been struck so by his father.

Instead, his father embraced him and wept as he held him tightly. In shocked disbelief, the prince buried his face against his father's shoulder.

"Do you wish to be freed of the dragon, my son?"

The prince answered in despair, "I have wished it many times, but there is no hope for me."

"Not alone," said the King. "You cannot win against the serpent alone."

"Father, I am no longer your son. I am half beast," sobbed the prince.

But his father replied, "My blood runs in your veins. My nobility has always been stamped deep within your soul. Nothing can take that from you."

With his face still hidden tearfully in his father's embrace, the prince heard the King instruct the crowd, "The dragon is crafty. Some fall victim to his wiles and some to his violence. There will be mercy for all who wish to be freed. Who else among you has ridden the dragon?"

The prince lifted his head to see someone emerge from the crowd. To his amazement, he recognized an older brother, one who had been lauded throughout the

kingdom for his onslaughts against the dragon in battle and for his many good deeds. Others came, some weeping, others hanging their heads in shame. The sister who was known for her beautiful singing came, tearfully removing her slippers to reveal spiked scales on her feet.

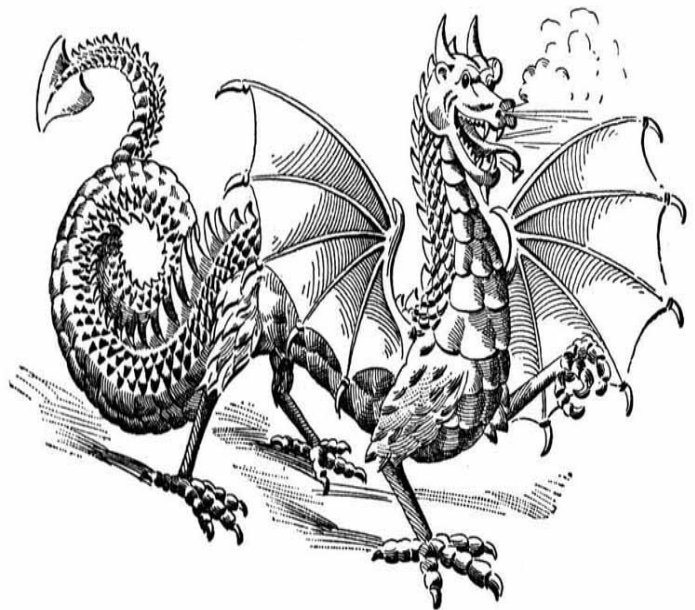
The King embraced them all.

"This is our most powerful weapon against the dragon," he announced. "Truth. No more hidden flights. Alone you cannot resist him. Together you will prevail, for you draw strength from one another. Those of you who think yourselves immune to the serpent's wiles, beware lest you be the next to fall. Those ensnared, you must desire freedom more than the dragon's flight. The struggle will be long and fierce. Over time, you will choose more often against the dragon than for him until finally you go to him no more."

"Will the scales then be gone as well?" asked the sister, looking at her bared feet.

"No, my child," the King answered gently. "But, in time, they will fade. And one day, when the dragon is finally slain, all traces of the scales will disappear."

"Death to the dragon!" someone yelled from the crowd and a great cheer rose up in chorus, "Death to the dragon! Long live the King!"



One of 19 stories by Melinda Reinicke, Psychologist, from the book *Parables for Personal Growth*. Available from Reinicke Counseling Associates (619) 298-8722x110 www.RCAcounseling.com. Watch a YouTube mini-movie of the Dragon Parable www.youtube.com/watch?v=6haX7K55TKo