

## THE DRAGON

by DAVE WELDRAKE

To trace the history of dragons in detail would require a search into the religion and folklore of every country in the world and would reveal many different creatures all going by the name of Dragon. In the east dragons are associated with the control of the elements, especially water, and are on the whole reasonably beneficent to humans. In the West, however, the dragon is the symbol of evil as in the St. George legends, but even so men have been impressed by its ability to inspire fear and it has become a symbol of strength and power. Therefore it is not surprising that the Vikings should shape their boats like dragons, or that the British warrior chiefs like Uther, father of King Arthur, should carry the title Pendragon for their bravery in battle.

However, the story of dragons begins long before this in Sumeria about 5,000 BC where the dragon Zu stole the tablets of law from Enlil the chief of the gods, who then ordered the sun god to slay the dragon. In Egypt too the dragon was the enemy of the sun. When the great boat of the sun passed beneath the earth each night it was always menaced by Apep the giant serpent of the underworld. In Iran Ahura Mazda, god of light, battles a three headed representing the spirit of deceit.

But these are all battles on a cosmic scale. How did man himself fare with a more earthly dragon? Surprisingly he met with a fair degree of success. Hercules slew the Hydra at Lerna. Jason, being more cunning, merely put the beast to sleep while he stole the golden fleece. Perseus even succeeded in turning one to stone and in so doing rescued a beautiful princess, an element which was to become almost standard in dragon stories of later years.

Another standard element connected with dragons is the idea that they guard treasure. This too was known by the Greeks. Artemidorus (2nd Century AD), in a book on the meaning of dreams, says that to dream of dragons means wealth and riches "because dragons make their fixed abode over treasure". In Norse mythology the dragon *nir* guards a vast hoard of treasure, and is slain by Siegfried, who drinks its blood to acquire the ability to understand the language of the birds. A similar hoard is supposed to be hidden at Cadbury Castle in Devon. This too is guarded by a dragon.

However, mediaeval saints were less interested in the acquiring of treasure than in the slaying of a monster which to them represented the devil. The best known of these is, of course, St. George, but amongst the others are St. Philip the Apostle who slew a dragon at Hieropolis by holding up a crucifix, St. Marthe who pacified the Tarasque by sprinkling it with holy water, after which it was stoned to death by the local populace, and St. Romanus who slew the Gargouille, a great dragon which ravaged the area around Rouen in the seventh century.

This example was not to be wasted on literally hundreds of knights who set out like King Pellinore to kill their own dragon. Usually this was done by some form of trickery rather than by open combat. The Lambton Worm, for instance, used to terrorize the banks of the river Wear. It had grown from a small worm which the heir of Lambton had hooked while fishing on a Sunday and thrown into a well where it grew to gigantic size before re-emerging. Meanwhile young Lambton went on a crusade and not until his return did he see the results of ignoring the Sabbath. However he set about destroying the monster but was foiled by its power of being able to rejoin parts of its body which had been cut off.

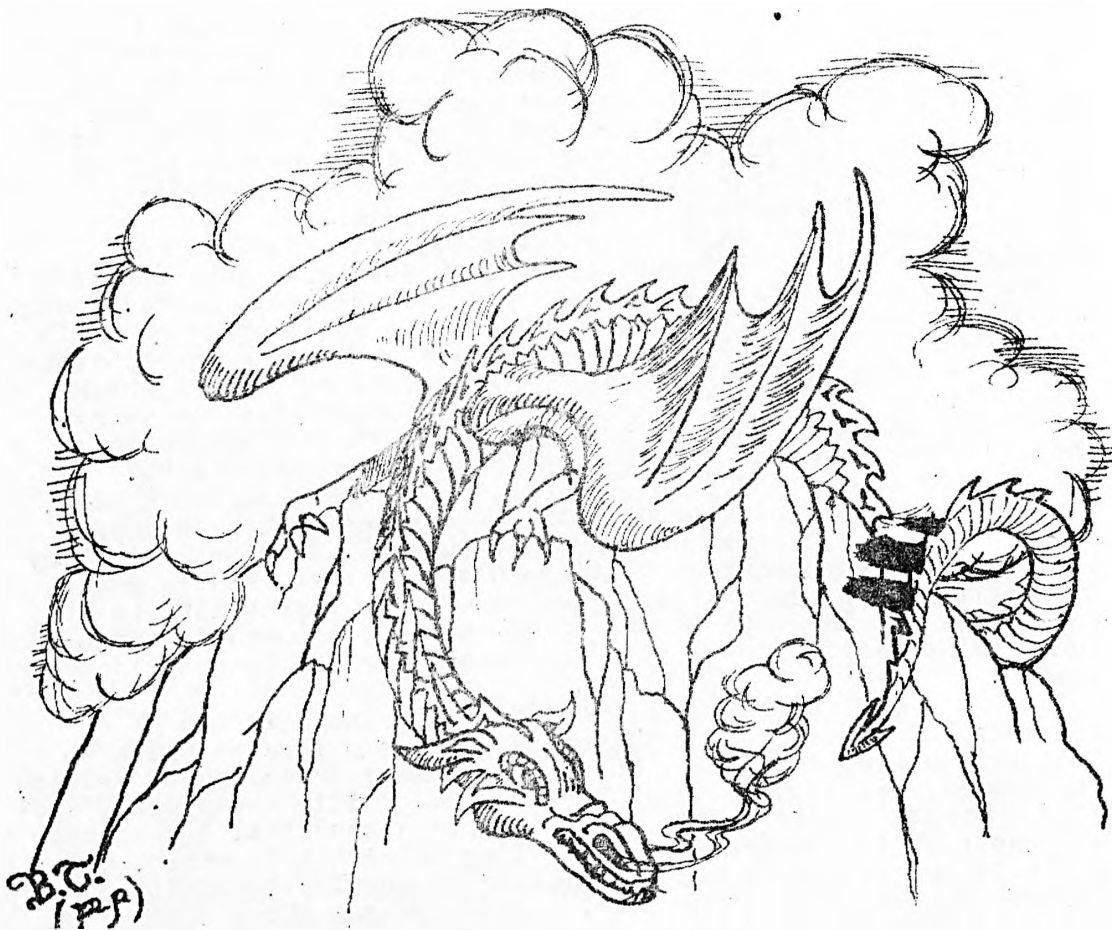
In despair young Lambton went to consult a witch who promised him victory on the condition that he would kill the first living thing he saw after the combat. He promised to do this and was told to fight the dragon in a suit of armour studded with razor blades and to fight on a crag in the middle of the river. So having made such a suit of armour he went to the crag and waited for the dragon, which was not long coming. The furious beast

wrapped itself around the knight and was cut to pieces by the razor blades, while the stream washed away the severed pieces and prevented them from joining up again.

Lambton had won his combat but there was still the penalty to pay, for as he made his way home, hoping to see a dog or some other animal, he saw his father running to greet him. Not being able to bring himself to slay his own father Lambton went once again to consult the witch who prophesied that as a result of Lambton not paying the forfeit no head of the Lambton family would lie in his bed for seven generations after which the curse would be lifted.

However, at least young Lambton fought with his dragon. Others resorted to even lower tricks quite outside the knightly tradition. One of these was King Cracus of Poland who, when he found his lands to be troubled by a dragon, hit upon the following ruse. He filled a calf's skin with sulphur, pitch, and nitre and threw it into the dragon's cave. The dragon pounced on it, swallowed it whole, gave a terrific bellow, and died instantly.

Once the dragon had been overcome its corpse was of great magical value. Most people know the story of Cadmus sowing the



dragon's teeth to raise an army of merciless warriors, but other parts of the dragon have their uses too. In the 'Horlus Sanitalis' we learn that "Dragons flesh is the colour of glass and cools those who eat it. Therefore the Ethiopians do gladly eat of the flesh of dragons, so that their factors tame the dragon with certain songs, and, sitting on his back, guide him with a bridle until they come to Ethiopia." If this is not enough we could put the dragons corpse to the use suggested by Topsell in his 'Historie of Foure-Footed Beasts': "The fat of a dragon, dryed in the sunne, is good against creeping ulcers; and the same mixed with Honey and Oyl helpeth the dimnesse of the eyes. The eyes ((of the dragon)) being kept till they are stale and afterwards beat into an Oyl with Honey and made into ointement keep any one that useth it from the terror of night visions and apparitions"

It seems to me that the recomenced cure is somewhat worse than the disease but since it could hardly have been tried out I don't suppose it matters. However, what does matter is that the dragon stories are still in the books and can still provide a source of wonder for those whose minds are not trapped by machines and