

THE SQUIRE AND THE DRAGON

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He met the man, who would later become a saint, in a tavern under the walls of Jerusalem. The knight was in his cups, and the sweat of heat and wine had smeared dust across his brow. He had been telling his story of the *draconis* to a trader in rock oil. But the trader had moved on to other conversations, and the knight was too drunk and too miserable to notice. Godfrey – a lost soul himself – paused a moment to listen; and although the story rambled and repeated itself, he was able to discern its basic thread. The knight was claiming to have fought a fell beast, and saved a princess from its vicious jaws, on the banks of a dead sea, somewhere in the thirsty lands beyond Jericho.

Godfrey had come to the Holy Land in the service of a knight, who had died of fever before managing to take up arms against the Musselman. And although Godfrey had searched hard among the Franks and the Germans and the Latins for another liege to serve, no warrior was willing to take on a squire so skinny of build and so clumsy with his sword. Godfrey knew that he should think about returning across the seas to England, perhaps with the Venetian traders who drank in that tavern and complained loudly about the weight of the King's custom fees. After all, he had seen the Holy Sepulchre now, and it had given him some vague idea that he might give up the sword and



dedicate himself to the Church. But although he was not much of a soldier, Godfrey *was* a youth of great curiosity. He had seen a lion and a porcupine in the menagerie of King Henry at Woodstock, and later, in Antioch, a crocodile – although that had been dead and shrivelled by the heat of the harsh Asia Minor sun. A dragon, he thought, would be something very fine indeed. So, he pushed his misgivings aside, and hired a Musselman servant. He then used what little money he had to buy a pair of camels, and together the two of them set off along the dry, dusty road to Jericho.



In Jericho, nobody had heard of the dragon. But they *had* heard of the knight, who had got drunk and raucous, and who had accosted the viceroy's daughter. 'The man is a liar,' the Franks told him. 'The man is a cheat. Do not believe the stories that he tells.' And Godfrey began to fear that the tale of the dragon was like the tales of the dog-headed men and the people who hiss like snakes – stories from the edge of the map, where truth is no longer tethered to reality. But still, his curiosity was a stubborn thing, and he wanted to make sure for himself. So he and his servant set off south once more, through the date plantations and banana groves, until they reached the hazed and greasy waters of the lifeless sea.

On the banks of the sun-flattened waters, Godfrey spoke with the bony, raw-handed men who worked the salt

pans, and to his delight he discovered that, although they knew nothing of the knight and his adventures, they *had* heard of the dragon. The men directed him half a day's hence, along the rocky, salt-edged shore, to a cave in the cliffs above the sea.

So it was that, several hours later, Godfrey arrived at the cave expecting to find a lizard-beast, with shining scales and leathery wings. But although the creature that he eventually saw had a lizard's head, its body was thick with primitive, ruddy feathers. It was big – far bigger than any ox or horse that Godfrey had seen – and when it spread its wings in flight, its shadow caused lizards and small mammals to scatter to safety. Watching it hunt, Godfrey was reminded of a passage from Revelation: 'And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.' But although he reckoned that the dragon might have been able to swallow a babe, or a lamb, its jaw was not big enough to consume anything larger. Certainly not a princess. The knight's story began to look faded and unlikely in the searing heat of the afternoon.

He came back several times in the days that followed, to watch the dragon as it hunted and slept and preened itself in the sun. Twice he saw the beast drink from one of the pools of rock oil that trickled up from the earth. Then, through some trick of its throat, the creature would spray the black liquid at its kill, igniting the mist with some click of its jaw, so that the meat would singe and crackle in a wreath of fire. Another man might have been tempted to kill it, and bring its head home as a trophy. But Godfrey simply took two red-brown feathers that had fallen from its wing, and placed them in a little wooden box, next to a bottle of holy water blessed by the patriarch of Jerusalem. He then carried them home with him to England as a reminder.

And many years later, in a small monastery on the edge of a patchwork of tranquil English fields, when his abbot asked him to illuminate the Book of Revelation, Godfrey did not draw a savage lizard-dragon feasting upon the newly born. Instead, he drew the dragon that he had seen, long ago in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, majestic and serene, and preening its feathers in the sun.

