

Orestes and the Dragon

by Maurice Baring

There was once upon a time a King who had three sons and one daughter. Not far from the King's palace there was a large garden, and in this garden lived a dragon. The King told his children never to go into the garden lest they should be caught by the dragon, which had wings. But one evening the youngest of the King's sons, whose name was Orestes, went with his sister into the garden and began to play. No sooner had they begun to play than the dragon appeared, and seizing the little Princess with its tail, flew away into the air and took her to a high mountain which no one could climb.

When Orestes went home and told of the misfortune, the King was very sad, and a black flag was hoisted on the top of the palace, and the whole Court went into mourning.

Now Orestes, since it had been through his fault that his sister had been lost, wished to be allowed to seek her; but his father would not let him do this, for Orestes was his favourite son. But one day when his father was busy, Orestes stole out of the house and walked to the foot of the high mountain, whither the dragon had taken his little sister. He wondered how he could climb it, and the task seemed difficult, indeed almost impossible, since the mountain was as smooth as glass.

While he was thus wondering he noticed two snakes which were fighting. One was black, and the other was white, and the black snake was getting the best of the fight and on the verge of killing the white one. Orestes at once killed the black snake, upon which the white snake said to him—

"You have saved my life! What can I do for you in return?"

"I wish for nothing," said Orestes, "save to be able to climb to the top of this mountain."

"Catch hold of my tail," said the snake, "and I will take you to the top of the mountain."

And the snake wriggled up the mountain, pulling the Prince after him, and as soon as they reached the top it disappeared.

Upon the top of the mountain, Orestes found a shepherd looking after the sheep of the dragon, and he entered into the service of this shepherd as a herdsman. One day when he was looking after the sheep he met his sister, and said to her: "I am your brother Orestes, and I have come to set you free."

His sister was surprised to see him, and frightened, and she said: "We must be very careful and cunning, lest the dragon should find us out, for it is impossible to escape from this place, nor can we save ourselves from the dragon. His rooms are all full of princesses whom he has taken captive, and who cannot climb down the mountain."

And she asked her brother how he had been able to climb it. He told her about the snake, and then he said—

"This evening, when the dragon comes back to his house, ask him where his strength lies, and I will come to-morrow and you shall tell me."

In the evening the dragon came home, and the Princess asked him where his strength lay, and the dragon told her that he had three golden hairs on the top of his head, and with these hairs one could open a room in which there were three doves; and were any one to kill the first dove, he would grow sick; and were any one to kill the second dove, he would grow worse; and if any one were to kill the third dove, he would die.

The next day, when the dragon had gone out on his daily business, which was to look for disobedient children in the country round and to catch them, the Princess went to her brother and told him what the dragon had said.

Orestes told her that when the dragon came back in the evening and fell asleep, she was to take a pair of scissors and cut off the three golden hairs, and open the secret room and kill the doves which were in it.

In the evening when the dragon came back and fell asleep, which he did at once, for he was tired, the Princess took a pair of scissors, cut off his three golden hairs, opened the secret room and killed the doves; and immediately the dragon gave a great groan and died.

As soon as he was dead, all the doors of all the rooms in the house, which had been carefully locked, flew open, and hundreds and hundreds of prisoners were set free. Among these there were three princesses. Orestes and his sister walked with these three princesses to the edge of the mountain top, and when they reached it Orestes saw his brothers, who were waiting at the foot of the hill.

Orestes took a rope, and first he let down his sister; then he let down the eldest of the princesses and said: "She shall be the wife of my eldest brother." Afterwards he let down the second of the princesses, and said: "She shall be the wife of my second brother." And, lastly, he let down the youngest princess, and he said: "This shall be my wife."

But when his brothers saw that the youngest princess was the most beautiful of the three, they were angry, and they jerked the rope out of Orestes' hands and left him on the top of the mountain.

Orestes was most sorrowful, and he went into the castle of the dragon and looked into all the rooms.

Now in one room, which was carpeted with green grass, he found a silken greyhound which was hunting a silken hare; and in another room he found a golden beaker and a golden jug; and in another he found a golden hen with golden chickens. Then he went to the stables, and there in a stall he found three horses with golden wings, and one was white, and one was red, and one was green.

"By opening the doors of our stable," said the horses, "you have done us a great favour. What can we do for you in return?"

"I do not wish for anything," said Orestes, "save to be taken to the foot of this mountain!"

"Get on my back," said the green horse; and Orestes got on his back, and the horse flew in a moment to the bottom of the mountain. Then each of the horses gave him two golden hairs, and said: "When you have need of us, burn one of these hairs and we will come."

After some days had passed, Orestes went into the city where the King, his father, lived, and

putting an old blanket over his head he pretended to be a beggar, and entered into the service of a goldsmith.

Now when the little Princess and her two brothers reached their father's house, with the three princesses who had been set free, the King asked them what had become of Orestes, and they said that Orestes had died; and the eldest of the brothers wished to marry the eldest of the princesses, but she refused to wed him unless he could find her the silken greyhound which hunted the silken hare. It was in the house of the dragon.

The King's herald proclaimed this everywhere. Then the beggar said to the goldsmith that he could accomplish the quest. "You need only give me a jug of wine and a basketful of chestnuts, and leave me alone in my room."

The goldsmith did this and shut the beggar up in his room, and he looked through the keyhole to see what he was doing. But the beggar did nothing at all; he merely ate the chestnuts and drank the wine, so the goldsmith went to his bedroom and went to sleep. Then the beggar took one of the hairs which the white horse had given him and burned it, and immediately the white horse appeared and said: "What do you wish?"

"I wish," said the beggar, "that you should bring me the silken greyhound and the silken hare."

The horse brought them immediately, and the beggar gave them to the goldsmith. The goldsmith went to the palace and sold them for much money to the eldest prince.

On Sunday the eldest brother married the eldest princess, and everybody went to a field and played quoits. And the beggar burned another golden hair, and immediately the green horse appeared and brought him a green garment. The beggar put it on, and went into the field and played quoits with the company. After he had played for a whole hour everybody had lost; he alone had won much money, and scattering on the grass the money he had won, he went back to the goldsmith's shop and put the blanket on his head once more.

The next Sunday it was arranged that his second brother should marry the second princess; she said she would not wed him unless he could bring her the golden beaker and the golden jug which were in the house of the dragon.

The King sent for all the goldsmiths in the country, and asked them to get him the golden beaker. And once more the beggar told his master that he could get it, and that all he needed were two basketsful of chestnuts and two jars of wine. And being left alone in a room he ate the nuts and drank the wine. Then he burned one of the hairs, and immediately the red horse appeared, and he said to him: "Bring me the golden beaker and the golden jug."

And the horse brought them, and the beggar went to the King, and the King bought them for a large sum of money. Again they went to play quoits in order to celebrate the second wedding, and the beggar burned another of the hairs, and immediately the red horse came to him and brought him a red garment, and when he put it on he went and played quoits. After he had played for a long time, all had lost save himself, and he went away, leaving the ground strewn with gold coins.

On the following Sunday the youngest princess was to be married to a brother of the King, but she did not wish to wed him, and she said that she would not, unless he brought her the golden hen and

the golden chickens.

Once more the beggar obtained these, and on Sunday, when the wedding was to be held, they went and played quoits, and the beggar went riding on a white horse and wearing a white garment; and as he was playing he threw the quoit at his uncle who was to wed the youngest princess, and killed him. And they took him to the palace, and the King said to him: "Why have you killed my brother?"

And the Prince told him everything that had happened, and as soon as the King heard the story he gave orders that the two eldest brothers should be put to death, and he gave the youngest princess to Orestes for a wife.

And they were married, and they lived happily for ever afterwards.

Source:

Baring, Maurice. "Orestes and the Dragon." *The Blue Rose Fairy Book*. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1911. 233 – 246. Electronic.