

More Fit for the Kingdom

By Chris Spendlove

Once upon a time, there was a knight. He was a relatively new knight to the kingdom, but nonetheless willing to fight for his King and Country. His most valuable possessions in the whole world were a suit of armor, a sword, and a shield that the King had given him when he was brand new in the kingdom. Everyday, the knight would polish the armor, checking for cracks and weak spots, sharpen the sword, lest he be caught off guard with a dull sword, and meticulously scrubbed the dirt and grime from his shield so as to keep himself protected in battle. He loved that armor, that sword, and the shield--he took such good care of them that the villagers, as they passed by on the way to the market or fields, would gaze in speechless wonder, and aspire to become gallant knights themselves.

Everyone loved the knight, and not just because of his armor; he was kind to the children, chivalrous to the women, and helpful to the men. The villagers felt that they could always depend on him to follow through with commitments and to lend a hand in any and every endeavor. He was widely considered to be a very good knight indeed.

One day, as the knight was polishing his armor, he heard the cry of the villagers, and, poking his head out of his tent, the knight spied a ferocious dragon lumbering toward the village! The knight had been warned that the dragon was a master deceiver, and even though one could plainly see he was a fire breathing monster, many had been tricked by his cunning. The knight hastily donned his armor, and, sword and shield in hand, rushed out to meet the dragon.

By the time the knight reached the village square, two peasants had already been devoured, a cart of grain had been upset, and a house was ablaze. "Oh boy," thought the knight. "This is one angry dragon! Armor? Check. Sword? Check. Shield? Check check." The knight rushed up to the dragon, brandishing his sword, yelling, "Alright, dragon! That's quite enough! You cannot be allowed to terrorize this village any longer!"

"But, my good lad," oozed the dragon--his voice was deep and rumbling, but he put on an air of sweet gentility. "I was only hungry. The food has been scarce around my cave, and I had no choice but to eat these villagers. Besides," he added, bending low next to the knight. "These two men were dishonest in their dealings! I have done your town a favor!" This startled the knight. Surely these men, who had been his friends, were good and honest men!

"You lie!" shouted the knight. "I knew these men, and, by golly, they were the most honest and true fellows you'll ever meet! Now, begone or I will use my sword--which is very sharp--and slay you right here!" Upon hearing this, the dragon became angry, but backed away (truth be told, he was a coward at heart). He eyed the knight's armor, looking for any crack or dent, and, finding none, he blew smoke from his nostrils and went away without another word.

The villagers rejoiced at the departure of the dragon. "You are such a brave and gallant knight that the dragon left without a fight! You truly are a great defender of the Kingdom! Three cheers of the brave knight!" That evening, a celebration was held in honor of the knight. "I suppose I AM a great defender, aren't I?" he thought to himself. The King himself arrived in all His splendor to congratulate the knight. Later in the night, the King pulled the knight aside.

"My boy," He said. "You have done well in defending our village against that old dragon. But be warned: the dragon will come back. He always does. He is a master of deception, as I told you before. He will invent new ways of destroying the people. And, if you are not careful in your preparation, the dragon will destroy you as well. He eyed your armor, didn't he?" The knight nodded. "I thought so. He was looking for cracks to get his awful claws into. Take care of that armor, my son. It will protect your life if you keep

it in good repair."

The knight pondered over the words of the King. "Destroy me?" he thought as he lay in his bed that evening. "Did the King even see how well I handled the dragon? Clearly the King has never fought a dragon like this one before. Why, I'll bet I could slay that dragon without any armor on at all! Ha!" And with that notion, the knight fell asleep and dreamed of slaying hundreds of dragons.

In the weeks to come, the knight was less diligent in cleaning his shield, sharpening his sword, and repairing his armor. In fact, the knight didn't wear his armor at all for a few days. When asked about his armor, the knight boasted that any dragon foolish enough to face him would be dead before he could say "Bob's your uncle." The villagers didn't quite know how to reply to the change in the knight's mein, so they just smiled and went on their ways. "Hm," he thought. "I wonder what's gotten into them?"

And, sure enough, the day came when that old dragon poked his ugly head into the village again. "Dragon! Dragon! help us, brave knight!" came the call. The knight reached for his armor, only to discover it was dirty, banged up, and starting to rust in some places. Slightly uneasy, the knight quickly strapped it on, grabbed his not-so-sharp sword and dingy shield, and rushed to the village.

The damage was worse this time; two houses had been leveled, their smouldering ruins littered with the bodies of the villagers, a cow had been slain, and much of the market had been pulverized. The dragon smiled slightly when he saw the knight run up, his armor in a state of disrepair.

"Well, well," he snarled. "If it isn't our gallant knight. How have you been? I am a fool to return when there is such a brave knight to oppose me."

"You've got that right!" retorted the knight, adjusting a loose strap under his arm. "I'm going to have to slay you this time, no questions asked."

"Surely you shall. But before you do me in, may I let you in on a secret? I'm not the enemy. It's that old King you should be after."

"Stop this! none of your lies! The King is good and just and cares for the welfare of His people!" cried the knight, brandishing his sword.

"Does he now? Is that why He sits on a golden throne and lets His people die? If He cared so much, wouldn't he come and face me Himself? risk His life for the good of His people? Some King, if you ask me," hissed the dragon. The knight began to ponder what the dragon had just said. He lowered his sword and shield slightly.

"No... you-you're wrong," the knight said half-heartedly. The King DID just sit on his throne, collect taxes, and make laws. Perhaps the dragon was right... The knight lowered his defenses.

Before he could respond, the dragon was upon him. He viciously ripped at the knight's armor with his claws and broke the weakened sword with his jaws. The knight struggled furiously against the might of the dragon, but to no avail. The dragon was merciless--he wounded the knight deeply with his claws and fangs. "I have not killed you," he laughed. "Not yet, at least. My claws and my fangs have a poison in them that will destroy you slowly. I find it more enjoyable to watch you writhe in agony before you perish. I will return to watch your last mortal moments." And, having left the knight in such a state, the dragon slipped away to his cave.

The knight slipped in and out of consciousness. Thoughts of despair resonated in his turbulent mind: "How could I have been so foolish! I am no brave knight. I am worse than the dragon! And now I will die, a broken, foolish, incapable louse." The pains of the dragon's poison ebbed and flowed throughout

his entire being; perhaps worse than the pain of the poison, however, were the pains of defeat, of losing the trust of the people, and, above all, harming the King. The King was a wise and loving monarch, and the knight had doubted Him. If only, if only he could somehow beg the King's forgiveness! But it was all over now. The knight, giving up his will to live, allowed himself to slip into unconsciousness...

"My son... rise, my boy." The knight resurfaced from the depths of a turbulent sleep. His vision came into focus upon the sadly smiling face of his beloved King. The knight had been brought back to the castle and was now lying in the bed of the King Himself! "Oh, my son.. you heeded not my counsel and warnings. You have been gravely wounded by that old serpent. But I will make you whole." The King smiled as He said this, and laid a reassuring hand on the shoulder of the knight. The knight wept bitterly.

"O, my King! I have betrayed you! I have turned my thoughts away from the light and meddled with the things of darkness! Forgive me! I beg you...forgive.. me..." The knight covered his face in his hands--he was too ashamed to be looked upon by the King.

"I will make you whole, my son. But you must put your trust in me. You must not go astray again, and you must re-learn what it means to be a knight. It will be difficult and the poisons of the dragon will sting as they leave your body, but I love you, my son, and I will stay by your side until you are healed." The knight looked into the eyes of his King, and he knew that the King could not lie. He nodded, and embraced the King.

"I will put my trust in you, my Lord. I know that you can do many mighty works and can heal me of this poison and fix my broken body and spirit." The King laid the young man back down, and the knight presently fell asleep.

When he awoke, the King was still by his side. The King was preparing a balm to apply to the wounds of the knight. "You must know that you have lost the trust of the villagers," the King said gravely. "They have lost much in the dragon's attack, and will lose much more while you heal. They have suffered much, but I think they will learn to forgive you in time." The king smiled softly and applied the balm. It seared the knight's flesh, and he yelped because of the pain. "This will be uncomfortable," the King continued, "but it will save your life." The knight, still smarting from the balm, realized that this pain was nothing compared to the pain that he had caused the poor villagers by his actions.

"They trusted in me," he said softly, "and I betrayed that trust by not being the man they needed me to be. I must repay the debt that I owe them--when I am well again, I will rebuild their houses, work in their fields, and serve them in their homes."

"And you must again face that dragon," the King reminded him. "You must show them that you are capable of defending them from the evils of this world as you did before. I will heal you, my son, but you must then do your part--protect the people, be the true and just defender you were born to be."

The weeks passed, and slowly the knight regained his strength. Daily, the King taught him once more how to be a knight; the young man loved being instructed so, and he resolved within himself to be a bold defender. And if he was wounded in his efforts to defend the people, the King promised that He would heal the knight, as long as he would learn from the battle.

The day came when the knight was fully healed and ready to face the dragon again. "The dragon said he would come back to watch me die," the knight told the King. "Perhaps he will return today, thinking that I am soon to perish."

"You must be ever watchful, my son, for the day when the dragon comes. You must be prepared. I want you to have these," said the King, presenting the knight with a bright new set of armor, a sharpened sword of excellent craftsmanship, and a large shield, upon which was emblazoned the Crest of the King.

"The best knights are those who get back up when they fall, who put their trust in their King, and face the challenges of life with hope. You have the makings of a great knight. I have confidence in you. Now go, my son, and be the defender you were born to be."

It was with confidence that the knight strode past the portcullis and out onto the drawbridge of the castle. The King had taught him to have hope, to put his best foot forward, and to keep moving forward in the face of opposition. The knight knew he had a solid foundation in the love of the King, and that no matter the circumstances, the King would be there to heal his wounds.

The villagers looked rather angrily at him as he walked through the town, and he heard them whispering under their breaths. The knight tried to offer apologies to them for the sorrow he had caused, but many of the townsfolk turned angrily away without a word. Others looked at him sadly, as if longing for the old knight to return, the knight who had defended them so bravely. "I will be their knight. I will use what I have learned from the King to protect these people from harm. It is my charge. It is my duty."

The knight spent the afternoon seeking to make amends with the people. As the sun set, the knight retired to his tent, seeking to get some rest in preparation for the oncoming confrontation with the dragon.

The morning came early; the golden fingers of dawn caressed the eyes of the young knight, beckoning him to rise. He polished his armor, sharpened the sword, and cleaned the shield with the same meticulous care as before, and headed out into the clear morning. No sooner had he set out, than the cry of "Dragon! dragon! who will save us?!" rang out from the square. The knight was ready. He had been anticipating this moment for weeks, had been preparing himself mentally, spiritually, and physically under the care of the King, and was now ready to prove himself to the villagers--he would show them that they could once again rely on him for support and defense. It was his duty.

The dragon roared with laughter as he spewed flames from deep in his gullet. "Where is your precious defender now?" he cackled, torching a cart of apples. "Your knight is dying! Fear, peasants! fear!"

"STOP!" shouted the knight. The dragon wheeled around to face the man in bright armor, sword ablaze with the morning sun. "I will defend these people, even if it costs me my life! Either you or I or both of us will die right here, right now!" The knight stared the dragon straight in the eyes, and, brandishing his sword with mighty conviction, rushed at the dragon.

"Hmph! Impudent boy! I crushed you once, I will crush you again!" The dragon reared up on his hind legs and barred his teeth.

Sword met claw, sending sparks into the air. The young knight fought not for himself, but for the safety of the people and for the honor of the King; he contended bravely against the evil dragon, using his shield to protect him from the dragon's fire and from the sharp fangs and claws. His sword was a piercing ray of light, scoring the black scales and flesh of the dragon with each stroke. The dragon was surprised at the courage of the knight--he had been so weak in their last encounter that the dragon underestimated the new-found bravery and conviction of his opponent. The dragon began to fear for his life as the knight blocked his swipes and parried with powerful blows to his neck and shoulders. Letting out a mighty roar, the dragon retreated toward his cave. "I will return, knight, and you will pay dearly for this encounter!!"

The villagers slowly appeared in the doorways of their homes and shops. The knight was burnt in some places, scratched and bruised in others, but he was alive and well; his armor had served him well against the vicious attacks of the dragon. As he looked into their faces, the young knight could see gratitude in the eyes of the people. Slowly, they began to applaud their defender. As the cheering grew, tears welled in the eyes of the young man--it was for them that he had fought so mightily, and it was for them that he

lived. The knight realized that day that his life was meant to be lived for others, and that there were people who depended on his strength and stability. He would, with the King's support, defend these people until the day he died, because it was with His support that he lived, and it was because of His gifts that he continued to fight.

The dragon was gone, but, they knew, he would return. And when he did, the knight would be there to protect and to defend and to serve them. The King would always be there too, watching with unparalleled love, willing to stand beside the wounded and ready to succor the needs of His people. The knight knew that he had a kind, wise friend in the King, and that, no matter the circumstances, the King would guide and protect him. He could go forward with hope and be the defender he was born to be.