

'THE FIGHT WITH THE DRAGON'

Friedrich von Schieller

Why run the crowd? What means the throng
That rushes fast the streets along?
Can Rhodes a prey to flames, then, be?
In crowds they gather hastily,
And, on his steed, a noble knight
Amid the rabble, meets my sight;
Behind him—prodigy unknown!—
A monster fierce they're drawing on;
A dragon stems it by its shape,
With wide and crocodile-like jaw,
And on the knight and dragon gape,
In turns, the people, filled with awe.

And thousand voices shout with glee
"The fiery dragon come and see,
Who hind and flock tore limb from limb!—
The hero see, who vanquished him!
Full many a one before him went,
To dare the fearful combat bent,
But none returned home from the fight;
Honor ye, then, the noble knight!"
And toward the convent move they all,
While met in hasty council there
The brave knights of the Hospital,
St. John the Baptist's Order, were.

Up to the noble master sped
The youth, with firm but modest tread;

The people followed with wild shout,
And stood the landing-place about,
While thus outspoke that daring one:
"My knightly duty I have done.
The dragon that laid waste the land
Has fallen beneath my conquering hand.
The way is to the wanderer free,
The shepherd o'er the plains may rove;
Across the mountains joyfully
The pilgrim to the shrine may move."

But sternly looked the prince, and said:
"The hero's part thou well hast played
By courage is the true knight known, —
A dauntless spirit thou hast shown.
Yet speak! What duty first should he
Regard, who would Christ's champion be,
Who wears the emblem of the Cross?" —
And all turned pale at his discourse.
Yet he replied, with noble grace,
While blushing he bent him low:
"That he deserves so proud a place
Obedience best of all can show."

"My son," the master answering spoke,
"Thy daring act this duty broke.
The conflict that the law forbade
Thou hast with impious mind essayed." —
"Lord, judge when all to thee is known,"
The other spake, in steadfast tone, —
"For I the law's commands and will
Purposed with honor to fulfil.
I went not out with heedless thought.
Hoping the monster dread to find;
To conquer in the fight I sought

By cunning, and a prudent mind."

"Five of our noble Order, then
(Our faith could boast no better men),
Had by their daring lost their life,
When thou forbadeest us the strife.
And yet my heart I felt a prey
To gloom, and panted for the fray;
Ay, even in the stillly night,
In vision gasped I in the fight;
And when the glimmering morning came,
And of fresh troubles knowledge gave,
A raging grief consumed my frame,
And I resolved the thing to brave."

"And to myself I thus began:
'What is't adorns the youth, the man?
What actions of the heroes bold,
Of whom in ancient song we're told,
Blind heathendom raised up on high
To godlike fame and dignity?
The world, by deeds known far and wide,
From monsters fierce they purified;
The lion in the fight they met,
And wrestled with the minotaur,
Unhappy victims free to set,
And were not sparing of their gore.'"

"Are none but Saracens to feel
The prowess of the Christian steel?
False idols only shall be brave?
His mission is the world to save;
To free it, by his sturdy arm,
From every hurt, from every harm;
Yet wisdom must his courage bend,

And cunning must with strength contend.'
Thus spake I oft, and went alone
The monster's traces to espy;
When on my mind a bright light shone, —
'I have it!' was my joyful cry."

"To thee I went, and thus I spake:
'My homeward journey I would take.'
Thou, lord, didst grant my prayer to me, —
Then safely traversed I the sea;
And, when I reached my native strand,
I caused a skilful artist's hand
To make a dragon's image, true
To his that now so well I knew.
On feet of measure short was placed
Its lengthy body's heavy load;
A scaly coat of mail embraced
The back, on which it fiercely showed."

"Its stretching neck appeared to swell,
And, ghastly as a gate of hell,
Its fearful jaws were open wide,
As if to seize the prey it tried;
And in its black mouth, ranged about,
Its teeth in prickly rows stood out;
Its tongue was like a sharp-edged sword,
And lightning from its small eyes poured;
A serpent's tail of many a fold
Ended its body's monstrous span,
And round itself with fierceness rolled,
So as to clasp both steed and man."

"I formed the whole to nature true,
In skin of gray and hideous hue;
Part dragon it appeared, part snake,

Engendered in the poisonous lake.
And, when the figure was complete,
A pair of dogs I chose me, fleet,
Of mighty strength, of nimble pace,
Inured the savage boar to chase;
The dragon, then, I made them bait,
Inflaming them to fury dread,
With their sharp teeth to seize it straight,
And with my voice their motions led."

"And, where the belly's tender skin
Allowed the tooth to enter in,
I taught them how to seize it there,
And, with their fangs, the part to tear.
I mounted, then, my Arab steed,
The offspring of a noble breed;
My hand a dart on high held forth,
And, when I had inflamed his wrath,
I stuck my sharp spurs in his side,
And urged him on as quick as thought,
And hurled my dart in circles wide
As if to pierce the beast I sought."

"And though my steed reared high in pain,
And champed and foamed beneath the rein,
And though the dogs howled fearfully,
Till they were calmed ne'er rested I.
This plan I ceaselessly pursued,
Till thrice the moon had been renewed;
And when they had been duly taught,
In swift ships here I had them brought;
And since my foot these shores has pressed
Flown has three mornings' narrow span;
I scarce allowed my limbs to rest
Ere I the mighty task began."

"For hotly was my bosom stirred
When of the land's fresh grief I heard;
Shepherds of late had been his prey,
When in the marsh they went astray.
I formed my plans then hastily, —
My heart was all that counselled me.
My squires instructing to proceed,
I sprang upon my well-trained steed,
And, followed by my noble pair
Of dogs, by secret pathways rode,
Where not an eye could witness bear,
To find the monster's fell abode."

"Thou, lord, must know the chapel well,
Pitched on a rocky pinnacle,
That overlooks the distant isle;
A daring mind 'twas raised the pile.
Though humble, mean, and small it shows
Its walls a miracle enclose, —
The Virgin and her infant Son,
Vowed by the three kings of Cologne.
By three times thirty steps is led
The pilgrim to the giddy height;
Yet, when he gains it with bold tread,
He's quickened by his Saviour's sight."

"Deep in the rock to which it clings,
A cavern dark its arms outflings,
Moist with the neighboring moorland's dew,
Where heaven's bright rays can ne'er pierce through.
There dwelt the monster, there he lay,
His spoil awaiting, night and day;
Like the hell-dragon, thus he kept
Watch near the shrine, and never slept;

And if a hapless pilgrim chanced
To enter on that fatal way,
From out his ambush quick advanced
The foe, and seized him as his prey."

"I mounted now the rocky height;
Ere I commenced the fearful fight,
There knelt I to the infant Lord,
And pardon for my sins implored.
Then in the holy fane I placed
My shining armor round my waist,
My right hand grasped my javelin,
The fight then went I to begin;
Instructions gave my squires among,
Commanding them to tarry there;
Then on my steed I nimbly sprung,
And gave my spirit to God's care."

"Soon as I reached the level plain,
My dogs found out the scent amain;
My frightened horse soon reared on high,—
His fear I could not pacify,
For, coiled up in a circle, lo!
There lay the fierce and hideous foe,
Sunning himself upon the ground.
Straight at him rushed each nimble hound;
Yet thence they turned, dismayed and fast,
When he his gaping jaws op'd wide,
Vomited forth his poisonous blast,
And like the howling jackal cried."

"But soon their courage I restored;
They seized with rage the foe abhorred,
While I against the beast's loins threw
My spear with sturdy arm and true:

But, powerless as a bulrush frail,
It bounded from his coat of mail;
And ere I could repeat the throw,
My horse reeled wildly to and fro
Before his basilisk-like look,
And at his poison-teeming breath, —
Sprang backward, and with terror shook,
While I seemed doomed to certain death."

"Then from my steed I nimbly sprung,
My sharp-edged sword with vigor swung;
Yet all in vain my strokes I plied, —
I could not pierce his rock-like hide.
His tail with fury lashing round,
Sudden he bore me to the ground.
His jaws then opening fearfully,
With angry teeth he struck at me;
But now my dogs, with wrath new-born,
Rushed on his belly with fierce bite,
So that, by dreadful anguish torn,
He howling stood before my sight."

"And ere he from their teeth was free,
I raised myself up hastily,
The weak place of the foe explored,
And in his entrails plunged my sword,
Sinking it even to the hilt;
Black gushing forth, his blood was spilt.
Down sank he, burying in his fall
Me with his body's giant ball,
So that my senses quickly fled;
And when I woke with strength renewed,
The dragon in his blood lay dead,
While round me grouped my squires all stood."

The joyous shouts, so long suppressed,
Now burst from every hearer's breast,
Soon as the knight these words had spoken;
And ten times 'gainst the high vault broken,
The sound of mingled voices rang,
Re-echoing back with hollow clang.
The Order's sons demand, in haste,
That with a crown his brow be graced,
And gratefully in triumph now
The mob the youth would bear along
When, lo! the master knit his brow,
And called for silence 'mongst the throng.

And said, "The dragon that this land
Laid waste, thou slew'st with daring hand;
Although the people's idol thou,
The Order's foe I deem thee now.
Thy breast has to a fiend more base
Than e'en this dragon given place.
The serpent that the heart most stings,
And hatred and destruction brings,
That spirit is, which stubborn lies,
And impiously cast off the rein,
Despising order's sacred ties;
'Tis that destroys the world amain."

"The Mameluke makes of courage boast,
Obedience decks the Christian most;
For where our great and blessed Lord
As a mere servant walked abroad,
The fathers, on that holy ground,
This famous Order chose to found,
That arduous duty to fulfil
To overcome one's own self-will!
'T was idle glory moved thee there:

So take thee hence from out my sight!
For who the Lord's yoke cannot bear,
To wear his cross can have no right."

A furious shout now raise the crowd,
The place is filled with outcries loud;
The brethren all for pardon cry;
The youth in silence droops his eye—
Mutely his garment from him throws,
Kisses the master's hand, and—goes.
But he pursues him with his gaze,
Recalls him lovingly, and says:
"Let me embrace thee now, my son!
The harder fight is gained by thee.
Take, then, this cross—the guerdon won
By self-subdued humility."