



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

St. George Of Merrie England

From "English Fairy Tales" by Flora Annie Steel

Illustrations by Arthur Rackham



n the darksome depths of a thick forest lived Kalyb the fell enchantress. Terrible were her deeds, and few there were who had the hardihood to sound the brazen trumpet which hung over the iron gate that barred the way to the Abode of Witchcraft. Terrible were the deeds of Kalyb; but above all things she delighted in carrying off innocent new-born babes, and putting them to death.

And this, doubtless, she meant to be the fate of the infant son of the Earl of Coventry, who long long years ago was Lord High Steward of England. Certain it is that the babe's father being absent, and his mother dying at his birth, the wicked Kalyb, with spells and charms, managed to steal the child from his careless nurses.

But the babe was marked from the first for doughty deeds; for on his breast was pictured the living image of a dragon, on his right hand was a blood-red cross, and on his left leg showed the golden garter.

And these signs so affected Kalyb, the fell enchantress, that she stayed her hand; and the child growing daily in beauty and stature, he became to her as the apple of her eye. Now, when twice seven years had passed the boy began to thirst for honourable adventures, though the wicked enchantress wished to keep him as her own.

But he, seeking glory, utterly disdained so wicked a creature; thus she sought to bribe him. And one day, taking him by the hand, she led him to a brazen castle and showed him six brave knights, prisoners therein. Then said she:

“Lo! These be the six champions of Christendom. Thou shalt be the seventh and thy name shall be St. George of Merrie England if thou wilt stay with me.”

But he would not.

Then she led him into a magnificent stable where stood seven of the most beautiful steeds ever seen. “Six of these,” said she, “belong to the six Champions. The seventh and the best, the swiftest and the most powerful in the world, whose name is Bayard, will I bestow on thee, if thou wilt stay with me.”

But he would not.

Then she took him to the armoury, and with her own hand buckled on a corselet of purest steel, and laced on a helmet inlaid with gold. Then, taking a mighty falchion, she gave it into his hand, and said: “This armour which none can pierce, this sword called Ascalon, which will hew in sunder all it touches, are thine; surely now thou wilt stop with me?”

But he would not.

Then she bribed him with her own magic wand, thus giving him power over all things in that enchanted land, saying:

“Surely now wilt thou remain here?”

But he, taking the wand, struck with it a mighty rock that stood by; and lo! it opened, and laid in view a wide cave garnished by the bodies of a vast number of innocent new-born infants whom the wicked enchantress had murdered.

Thus, using her power, he bade the sorceress lead the way into the place of horror, and when she had entered, he raised the magic wand yet again, and smote the rock; and lo! it closed for ever, and the sorceress was left to bellow forth her lamentable complaints to senseless stones.

Thus was St. George freed from the enchanted land, and taking with him the six other champions of Christendom on their steeds, he mounted Bayard and rode to the city of Coventry.

Here for nine months they abode, exercising themselves in all feats of arms. So when spring returned they set forth, as knights errant, to seek for foreign adventure.

And for thirty days and thirty nights they rode on, until, at the beginning of a new month, they came to a great wide plain. Now in the centre of this plain, where seven several ways met, there stood a great brazen pillar, and here, with high heart and courage, they bade each other farewell, and each took a separate road.

Hence, St. George, on his charger Bayard, rode till he reached the seashore where lay a good ship bound for the land of Egypt. Taking passage in her, after long journeying he arrived in that land when the silent wings of night were outspread, and darkness brooded on all things. Here, coming to a poor hermitage, he begged a night's lodging, on which the hermit replied:

“Sir Knight of Merrie England—for I see her arms graven on thy breastplate—thou hast come hither in an ill time, when those alive are scarcely able to bury the dead by reason of the cruel destruction waged by a terrible dragon, who ranges up and down the country by day and by night. If he have not an innocent maiden to devour each day, he sends a mortal plague amongst the people. And this has not ceased for twenty and four years, so that there is left throughout the land but one maiden, the beautiful Sâbia, daughter to the King. And to-morrow must she die, unless some brave knight will slay the monster. To such will the King give his daughter in marriage, and the crown of Egypt in due time.”

“For crowns I care not,” said St. George boldly, “but the beauteous maiden shall not die. I will slay the monster.”

So, rising at dawn of day, he buckled on his armour, laced his helmet, and with the falchion Ascalon in his hand, bestrode Bayard, and rode into the Valley of the Dragon. Now on the way he met a procession of old women weeping and wailing, and in their midst the most beauteous damsel he had ever seen. Moved by compassion he dismounted, and bowing low before the lady entreated her to return to her father's palace, since he was about to kill the dreaded dragon. Whereupon the beautiful Sâbia, thanking him with smiles and tears, did as he requested, and he, re-mounting, rode on his emprise.

Now, no sooner did the dragon catch sight of the brave Knight than its leathern throat sent out a sound more terrible than thunder, and weltering from its hideous den, it spread its burning wings and prepared to assail its foe.

Its size and appearance might well have made the stoutest heart tremble. From shoulder to tail ran full forty feet, its body was covered with silver scales, its belly was as gold, and through its flaming wings the blood ran thick and red.

So fierce was its onset, that at the very first encounter the Knight was nigh felled to the ground; but recovering himself he gave the dragon such a thrust with his spear that the latter shivered to a thousand pieces; whereupon the furious monster smote him so violently with its tail that both horse and rider were overthrown.

Now, by great good chance, St. George was flung under the shade of a flowering orange tree, whose fragrance hath this virtue in it, that no poisonous beast dare come within the compass of its branches. So there the valiant knight had time to recover his senses, until with eager courage he rose, and rushing to the combat, smote the burning dragon on his burnished belly with his trusty sword Ascalon; and thereafter spouted out such black venom, as, falling on the armour of the Knight, burst it in twain. And ill might it have fared with St. George of Merrie England but for the orange tree, which once again gave him shelter under its branches, where, seeing the issue of the fight was in the Hands of the Most High, he knelt and prayed that such strength of body should be given him as would enable him to prevail. Then with a bold and courageous heart, he advanced again, and smote the fiery dragon under one of his flaming wings, so that the weapon pierced the heart, and all the grass around turned crimson with the blood that flowed from the dying monster. So St. George of England cut off the dreadful head, and hanging it on a truncheon made of the spear which at the beginning of the combat had shivered against the beast's scaly back, he mounted his steed Bayard, and proceeded to the palace of the King.

Now the King's name was Ptolemy, and when he saw that the dreaded dragon was indeed slain, he gave orders for the city to be decorated. And he sent a golden chariot with wheels of ebony and cushions of silk to bring St. George to the palace, and commanded a hundred nobles dressed in crimson velvet, and mounted on milk-white steeds richly caparisoned, to escort him thither with all honour, while musicians walked before and after, filling the air with sweetest sounds.

Now the beautiful Sâbia herself washed and dressed the weary Knight's wounds, and gave him in sign of betrothal a diamond ring of purest water. Then, after he had been invested by the King with the golden spurs of knighthood and had been magnificently feasted, he retired to rest his weariness, while the beautiful Sâbia from her balcony lulled him to sleep with her golden lute.

So all seemed happiness; but alas! dark misfortune was at hand.

Almidor, the black King of Morocco, who had long wooed the Princess Sâbia in vain, without having the courage to defend her, seeing that the maiden had given her whole heart to her champion, resolved to compass his destruction.

So, going to King Ptolemy, he told him—what was perchance true—namely, that the beauteous Sâbia had promised St. George to become Christian, and follow him to England. Now the thought of this so enraged the King that, forgetting his debt of honour, he determined on an act of basest treachery.

Telling St. George that his love and loyalty needed further trial, he entrusted him with a message to the King of Persia, and forbade him either to take with him his horse Bayard or his sword Ascalon; nor would he even allow him to say farewell to his beloved Sâbia.

St. George then set forth sorrowfully, and surmounting many dangers, reached the Court of the King of Persia in safety; but what was his anger to find that the secret missive he bore contained nothing but an earnest request to put the bearer of it to death. But he was helpless, and when sentence had been passed upon him, he was thrown into a loathly dungeon, clothed in base and servile weeds, and his arms strongly fettered up to iron bolts, while the roars of the two hungry lions who were to devour him ere long, deafened his ears. Now his rage and fury at this black treachery was such that it gave him strength, and with mighty effort he drew the staples that held his fetters; so being part free he tore his long locks of amber-coloured hair from his head and wound them round his arms instead of gauntlets. So prepared he rushed on the lions when they were let loose upon him, and thrusting his arms down their throats choked them, and thereafter tearing out their very hearts, held them up in triumph to the gaolers who stood by trembling with fear.

After this the King of Persia gave up the hopes of putting St. George to death, and, doubling the bars of the dungeon, left him to languish therein. And there the unhappy Knight remained for seven long years, his thoughts full of his lost Princess; his only companions rats and mice and creeping worms, his only food and drink bread made of the coarsest bran and dirty water.

At last one day, in a dark corner of his dungeon, he found one of the iron staples he had drawn in his rage and fury. It was half consumed with rust, yet it was sufficient in his hands to open a passage through the walls of his cell into the King's garden. It was the time of night when all things are silent; but St. George, listening, heard the voices of grooms in the stables; which, entering, he found two grooms furnishing forth a horse against some business. Whereupon, taking the staple with which he had redeemed himself from prison, he slew the grooms, and mounting the palfrey rode boldly to the city gates, where he told the watchman at the Bronze Tower that St. George having escaped from the dungeon, he was in hot pursuit of him. Whereupon the gates were thrown open, and St. George, clapping spurs to his horse, found himself safe from pursuit before the first red beams of the sun shot up into the sky.

Now, ere long, being most famished with hunger, he saw a tower set on a high cliff, and riding thitherward determined to ask for food. But as he neared the castle he saw a beauteous damsel in a blue and gold robe seated disconsolate at a window. Whereupon, dismounting, he called aloud to her:

“Lady! If thou hast sorrow of thine own, succour one also in distress, and give me, a Christian Knight, now almost famished, one meal's meat.” To which she replied quickly:

“Sir Knight! Fly quickly as thou canst, for my lord is a mighty giant, a follower of Mahomed, who hath sworn to destroy all Christians.”

Hearing this St. George laughed loud and long. “Go tell him then, fair dame,” he cried, “that a Christian Knight waits at his door, and will either satisfy his wants within his castle or slay the owner thereof.”

Now the giant no sooner heard this valiant challenge than he rushed forth to the combat, armed with a hugeous crowbar of iron. He was a monstrous giant, deformed, with a huge head, bristled like any boar's, with hot, glaring eyes and a mouth equalling a tiger's. At first sight of him St. George gave himself up for lost, not so much for fear, but for hunger and faintness of body. Still, commending himself to the Most High, he also rushed to the combat with such poor arms as he had, and with many a regret for the loss of his magic sword Ascalon. So they fought till noon, when, just as the champion's strength was nigh finished, the giant stumbled on the root of a tree, and St. George, taking his chance, ran him through the mid-rib, so that he gasped and died.

After which St. George entered the tower; whereat the beautiful lady, freed from her terrible lord, set before him all manner of delicacies and pure wine with which he sufficed his hunger, rested his weary body, and refreshed his horse.

So, leaving the tower in the hands of the grateful lady, he went on his way, coming ere long to the Enchanted Garden of the necromancer Ormadine, where, embedded in the living rock, he saw a magic sword, the like of which for beauty he had never seen, the belt being beset with jaspers and sapphire stones, while the pommel was a globe of the purest silver chased in gold with these verses:

My magic will remain most firmly bound
Till that a knight from the far north be found
To pull this sword from out its bed of stone.
Lo! when he comes wise Ormadine must fall.
Farewell, my magic power, my spell, my all.

Seeing this St. George put his hand to the hilt, thinking to essay pulling it out by strength; but lo! he drew it out with as much ease as though it had hung by a thread of untwisted silk. And immediately every door in the enchanted garden flew open, and the magician Ormadine appeared, his hair standing on end; and he, after kissing the hand of the champion, led him to a cave where a young man wrapped in a sheet of gold lay sleeping, lulled by the songs of four beautiful maidens.

"The Knight whom thou seest here!" said the necromancer in a hollow voice, "is none other than thy brother-in-arms, the Christian Champion St. David of Wales. He also attempted to draw my sword but failed. Him hast thou delivered from my enchantments since they come to an end."

Now, as he spoke, came such a rattling of the skies, such a lumbering of the earth as never was, and in the twinkling of an eye the Enchanted Garden and all in it vanished from view, leaving the Champion of Wales, roused from his seven years' sleep, giving thanks to St. George, who greeted his ancient comrade heartily.

After this St. George of Merrie England travelled far and travelled fast, with many adventures by the way, to Egypt where he had left his beloved Princess Sâbia. But, learning to his great grief and horror from the same hermit he had met on first landing, that, despite her denials, her father, King Ptolemy, had consented to Almidor the black King of Morocco carrying her off as one of his many wives, he turned his steps towards Tripoli, the capital of Morocco; for he was determined at all costs to gain a sight of the dear Princess from whom he had been so cruelly rent.

To this end he borrowed an old cloak of the hermit, and, disguised as a beggar, gained admittance to the gate of the Women's Palace, where were gathered together on their knees many others, poor, frail, infirm.

And when he asked them wherefore they knelt, they answered:

“Because good Queen Sâbia succours us that we may pray for the safety of St. George of England, to whom she gave her heart.”

Now when St. George heard this his own heart was like to break for very joy, and he could scarce keep on his knees when, lovely as ever, but with her face pale and sad and wan from long distress, the Princess Sâbia appeared clothed in deep mourning.

In silence she handed an alms to each beggar in turn; but when she came to St. George she started and laid her hand on her heart. Then she said softly:

“Rise up, Sir Beggar! Thou art too like one who rescued me from death, for it to be meet for thee to kneel before me!”

Then St. George rising, and bowing low, said quietly: “Peerless lady! Lo! I am that very knight to whom thou did'st condescend to give this.”

And with this he slipped the diamond ring she had given him on her finger. But she looked not at it, but at him, with love in her eyes.

Then he told her of her father's base treachery and Almidor's part in it, so that her anger grew hot and she cried:

“Waste no more time in talk. I remain no longer in this detested place. Ere Almidor returns from hunting we shall have escaped.”



When she came to St. George she started and laid her hand on her heart

So she led St. George to the armoury, where he found his trusty sword Ascalon, and to the stable, where his swift steed Bayard stood ready caparisoned.

Then, when her brave Knight had mounted, and she, putting her foot on his, had leapt like a bird behind him, St. George touched the proud beast lightly with his spurs, and, like an arrow from a bow, Bayard carried them together over city and plain, through woods and forests, across rivers, and mountains, and valleys, until they reached the Land of Greece.

And here they found the whole country in festivity over the marriage of the King. Now amongst other entertainments was a grand tournament, the news of which had spread through the world. And to it had come all the other Six Champions of Christendom; so St. George arriving made the Seventh. And many of the champions had with them the fair lady they had rescued. St. Denys of France brought beautiful Eglantine, St. James of Spain sweet Celestine, while noble Rosalind accompanied St. Anthony of Italy. St. David of Wales, after his seven years' sleep, came full of eager desire for adventure. St. Patrick of Ireland, ever courteous, brought all the six Swan-princesses who, in gratitude, had been seeking their deliverer St. Andrew of Scotland; since he, leaving all worldly things, had chosen to fight for the faith.

So all these brave knights and fair ladies joined in the joyful jousting, and each of the Seven Champions was in turn Chief Challenger for a day.

Now in the midst of all the merriment appeared a hundred heralds from a hundred different parts of the Paynim world, declaring war to the death against all Christians.

Whereupon the Seven Champions agreed that each should return to his native land to place his dearest lady in safety, and gather together an army, and that six months later they should meet, and, joining as one legion, go forth to fight for Christendom.

And this was done. So, having chosen St. George as Chief General, they marched on Tripoli with the cry:

“For Christendom we fight,
For Christendom we die.”

Here the wicked Almidor fell in single combat with St. George, to the great delight of his subjects, who begged the Champion to be King in his stead. To this he consented, and, after he was crowned, the Christian host went on towards Egypt where King Ptolemy, in despair of vanquishing such stalwart knights, threw himself down from the battlements of the palace and was killed. Whereupon, in recognition of the chivalry and courtesy of the Christian Champions, the nobles offered the Crown to one of their number, and they with acclaim chose St. George of Merrie England.

Thence the Christian host journeyed to Persia, where a fearsome battle raged for seven days, during which two hundred thousand pagans were slain, beside many who were drowned in attempting to escape. Thus they were compelled to yield, the Emperor himself happening into the hands of St. George, and six other viceroys into the hands of the six other Champions.

And these were most mercifully and honourably entreated after they had promised to govern Persia after Christian rules. Now the Emperor, having a heart fraught with despite and tyranny, conspired against them, and engaged a wicked wizard named Osmond to so beguile six of the Champions that they gave up fighting, and lived an easy slothful life. But St. George would not be beguiled; neither would he consent to the enchantment of his brothers; and he so roused them that they never sheathed their swords nor unlocked their armour till the wicked Emperor and his viceroys were thrown into that very dungeon in which St. George had languished for seven long years.

Whereupon St. George took upon himself the government of Persia, and gave the six other Champions the six viceroyalties.

So, attired in a beautiful green robe, richly embroidered, over which was flung a scarlet mantle bordered with white fur and decorated with ornaments of pure gold, he took his seat on the throne which was supported by elephants of translucent alabaster. And the Heralds at arms, amid the shouting of the people, cried:

“Long live St. George of Merrie England, Emperor of Morocco, King of Egypt, and Sultan of Persia!”

Now, after that he had established good and just laws to such effect that innumerable companies of pagans flocked to become Christians, St. George, leaving the Government in the hands of his trusted counsellors, took truce with the world and returned to England, where, at Coventry, he lived for many years with the Egyptian Princess Sâbia, who bore him three stalwart sons. So here endeth the tale of St. George of Merrie England, first and greatest of the Seven Champions.

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