

St George and the Dragon

by ANTHONY COONEY

Venantius Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers, some of whose hymns are included in the Westminster Hymnal, wrote in the sixth century:

"Gleams the strong palace of the noble martyr George,
Whose honour strews the whole wide world.

"In valour mighty, tombed beneath eastern heavens,
Lo, neath western skies he offers help."

evidence that the cultus of St George as martyr and intercessor had spread throughout the Christian world. Yet for most Englishmen, St George to "killed a dragon." Those who consider themselves too progressive for such strange fancies look upon him as a vague, shadowy figure, perhaps hardly less legendary than the dragon. Yet the basic facts of George's life and martyrdom are as well attested as are those of many historical figures. An account of his life appears in the "Encomium" of Theodotus, Bishop of Ancyra. Eusebius tells us that George was the first of those who distinguished himself as a Christian during the last great persecution under Diocletian, and St Ambrose of Milan writes that when others concealed their Christianity, George "Alone adventured to confess the Name of God."

The facts which may be considered beyond dispute are that St George was born at Lydda, in the Vale of Sharon of a Christian family; possibly descended from "The Saints that are at Lydda" mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles*." His father was a man of high rank in the Roman Army and George followed in his footsteps. He rose in Diocletian's favour and became Tribune of the Imperial Guard, in our terms, a Colonel. He occupied that position in 298 A.D. when the edicts against Christians were promulgated. These required all those in the Imperial Service to sacrifice to the Genius of the Emperor, forbade Christian assemblies, banned the scriptures and liturgical books and ordered the destruction of churches, under pain of penalties ranging from confiscation of property to death.

If Ambrose's remark is read aright it would seem that there were many for whom discretion was the better part of Faith when this final persecution of the Church broke out. George however went boldly before the Emperor and declared, "I am a Christian." He did so in order to plead for the alleviation of the persecution of his fellow Christians. The power of his example would not be lost on the Emperor and the man who dominated him, the Caesar, Galerius Maximus. Blandishments were used to persuade him to offer incense to the Emperor. When these failed imprisonment, torture and death followed. St George was beheaded on April 23, Good Friday, of the year 304 A.D. his friends took his body to his native Lydda

where they planted a rose bush on his grave.

Within a few years the Empire was Christian, Constantine built a church on the site of George's martyrdom which is now known as the "Mosque of St George," and a second church over the site of his grave at Lydda. The cult of the martyr spread rapidly and ruins of churches dedicated to him exist in Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt. The oldest church, thought to date from the fourth century, is in Thessalonica. At El Kudr in Palestine there was a convent of St George to which both Christians and Muslims brought their sick, especially lunatics, for healing. The earliest known church dedicated to St George in Britain was in Doncaster and dates from the early 7th century.

St George is honoured in the Greek Church as "Captain of the Noble Army of Martyrs," and as "The Trophy Bearer." He is also regarded as the Patron Saint of Husbandry and the Protector of Youth. In both East and West he is the patron saint of soldiers (particularly cavalry) and the Champion of the Oppressed. In the West he is honoured as one of the seven Champions of Christendom, as Patron Saint of Bankers and as Protector of those in peril on the sea. He is Patron Saint of England, of Catalonia and of Georgia.

According to J. B. Aufauser (*Das Drachenwunder des heiligen Georg in der Grickeshen und latienshen Uberlieferungs*) the legend of the dragon first appeared in writing in the 10th century, but it seems to have appeared all over Europe at about the same time, which possibly points to an older oral tradition. The familiar version of the story is found in the *Legend Aurea* of James of Voraigue the story is as follows:

"For some time a terrible dragon had ravaged all the country round the city of Selena in Libya, making its lair in a swamp. Its breath caused pestilence whenever it approached the town. So the people gave the dragon two sheep every day to satisfy its hunger, but when the sheep were all gone, a human victim was necessary. Lots were drawn to determine the victim and they fell upon the king's daughter. She was led, dressed as a bride, to the edge of the swamp. There St George chanced by and asked the maiden what she was doing alone in such a place. She told him of the dragon and urged him to leave, but he would not. When the monster appeared he made the Sign of the Cross and pierced it with his lance. He asked the maiden for her girdle and binding it round the dragon's neck led it meek as a lamb, to the maid, who took it to the city. St George told the people to have no fear, but to be baptized, and bidding them to honour the clergy and pity the poor, rode on about God's business."

The first thing to notice about this version of the legend is that St George is not reputed to have slain the dragon. He overcame it and brought it to heel so that in

future it served the city it had tormented. There is a clear allegorical meaning. The city is a man, the king is his reason, which ought to rule over the passions, the princess is his soul and the dragon is the instincts and desires of the flesh. If the instincts are not governed by reason they threaten the soul. At first they may be placated with small things, but growing stronger by these concessions they eventually threaten the immortal soul itself. St George on the white horse symbolizes the Grace of God, which if it is accepted enables the soul to master the flesh, the desires and faculties of which are then brought meek and controlled into their proper service of the whole man.

The story is therefore an allegory of man's life and destiny, his fall and his salvation. An obvious comparison is with the legend of St Francis and the Wolf of Gubio. Why however, was it particularly and suddenly attached to St George and not to any of a thousand other martyrs. It has already been suggested that the widespread appearance of the legend in writing indicates a much older oral tradition, a tradition which may rest on a different sort of fact than that related by the allegory. The following hypothesis is offered as a possible explanation.

The Roman Emperors used their coinage for propaganda. This is the origin of the image of Britannia; it informed the Empire that Claudius had conquered Britain. A coin struck by Constantine shows a fallen dragon surmounted by the Greek initials of the name of Christ. The symbolism is obvious: Christ overcomes the dragon. But what does the dragon symbolize? Today we would unhesitatingly say "Satan," or "Sin" but dragons, as the banners of Wales and Wessex show, were not considered satanic in the ancient world, merely fearsome. A clue is provided by the Roman historian. Ammianus Marcellinus, whose Silver Latin was to be recovered to play a notable part in the Renaissance. He describes how the Caesar was recognized in battle by the *purple standard of the dragon*. The princes of Wales claimed the dragon banner by reason of their descent from Maxim Weltic, proclaimed Emperor at Segontium (Caernarfon).

In the original story, was the dragon St George battled with and overcame, Diocletian, Emperor and Dragon bearer of Rome? Certainly St George did not overcome the Roman Empire with the sword. By his example which "*when faith by others was concealed,*" inspired many to remain faithful, he overcame the last great assault of the Dragon upon the Church. Through the merits of his martyrdom the Dragon was bound by the Church's girdle and led, meekly as a lamb, into the service of Christ.

We have then no vague, shadowy figure, half legend, half myth, for our patron Saint, but one illustrious in the Company of Christ. England needs St George. In an age of soil-mining it needs the Christian husbandry of which he is Patron. In an age of social and philosophic lunacy it needs the sanity he restores. In an age of

pornography and assault upon the minds and souls of the young it needs this great Protector in heaven. How different might our present situation be if we stormed heaven by prayer and intercession on April 23rd?

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