

# Tale of the Dragonslayer Knights

By M.C. Williams

He had listened to his grandchildren play for most of the afternoon--his granddaughter, Sylia, who was no more than eight, and the two younger boys, Dallen and Callen. They had started off playing a game of knucklebones that some how changed into them running around as knights with sticks for swords. Even Sylia was somehow a knight, and apparently their leader.

"Grandpapa, Grandpapa!" called Sylia, suddenly rushing up to him. "Tell us the story!"

The old man bent down as though to look at her, imagining her face--a face he had never seen. "And what story is that?"

"You know--about the Dragonslayer Knights!"

"That is not a story for little girls."

She laughed, and the boys giggled. "Grandpapa's too old!"

He smiled. Her words were not meant to hurt him; she just meant he was 'old fashioned'. "Well, I guess you're right. What do you all say?"

The boys cheered. They, of course, had never even heard the tale.

He sat back and felt one of the boys jump up on his leg. Callen, he surmised, since he was smaller and lighter than Dallen. "Let me see," he mulled. He felt odd whenever the expression slipped his lips; he had not seen anything since the War took his sight. "Where to begin--"

The children drew silent, eager to hear the tale.

"Before the Age of Progress, between the days of Old Antaria and the coming of the War of Tyranny, there came a time of glorious adventure when great kings and gallant knights battled the fell beasts of Tarrona. For 100 years the warring clans of Tarrona consumed themselves in brutal strife, until only three mighty kingdoms remained--Tilsha, Antaria, and Suddaea to the south. The three nations agreed to rule their respective lands in peace and to defend one another's borders from monsters and barbarian hordes. For years the kingdoms prospered and flourished, and the people of Tarrona dreamed of greater futures.

The dream, however, was not to last.

"For, you see, in those days the dark lands of the north were the domain of dragons. No one knows what happened or what changed; perhaps it was unseasonable winters or the movements of the great ice flows. But whatever the cause, the dragons encroached closer and closer to the southern kingdoms with every passing year. By the tenth year of the reign of King Komesh of Tilsha, the dragons inhabited all the land of Phana and had moved as far as the northern border of the country we call Alran--then a remote and untamed wilderness. There were many sightings of dragons; a few set upon smaller outlying towns, attacking cattle and terrifying villagers. But the dragons were not fool enough to threaten the great kingdoms of men, for as fearsome as they were, they preferred easy prey over total war.

"For years the dragons coexisted alongside men as distant and uneasy neighbors. To be sure, an occasional knight-errant would test his mettle against a dragon lurking near some village; every so often an ill or angry dragon would lash out at a farm or remote settlement. Eventually, and with much prodding from his knight regent, Sir Balewynn, King Komesh dispatched an expedition of knights deep into the craggy highlands of Phana. But he did not send them to slay the dragons--instead, he charged them to take census of the dragons, finding them and counting their numbers, and sent with them scholars and wizards familiar with the ways of dragon-kind.

"But Sir Balewynn had other plans in mind. For six months Balewynn and his men wove their way through the wilderness, killing as many dragons as they could find. Of the twenty knights and eight scholars, only three returned to Tilsha. The dragons, understandably, had not taken well to Balewynn's offensive. Their reprisal came swift and harsh. Thirty villages were destroyed, hundreds of men and women burned alive, and thousands of acres of farmland were turned to smoldering ash. As terrible a punishment as it was, the conflict would have ended there had King Komesh not made his fateful decision.

"The king learned from the one surviving scholar of the expedition that the true number of dragons was likely far less than had been believed. Hearing this, and imagining the dragon threat could be purged in one fell blow, he resolved himself and his kingdom to a great and terrible crusade--the total extermination of all dragon-kind.

"Heralds were dispatched to the far corners of Tarrona and across the Sea of Isles to every court and castle, proclaiming the establishment of the Dragonslayer Knights of Tilsha and calling to arms any knight brave enough to face the dreaded, winged beasts. Hundreds rallied to the court of King Komesh--knights from Antaria and warriors from Suddaea, horsemen from Alran and mercenaries from Canath. They came even from distant Celephania--the knights of Armillia, Kaffrian fighters, and spearmen from the jungles of Azania. Among the greatest of them were Sir Celborn and Sir Thaogwnn of Tilsha, Master Azahad and Meradad of Suddaea, Lord Sargis of Antaria, Sir Jaemont of Armillia, the Kaffrian swordmaster Amalet, and the noble dworgh Hanjaldr the Hornbreaker. Indeed, it seemed the whole world had been waiting to answer the call of King Komesh.

"The Eldrien, in their ancient wisdom, had warned Komesh not to bring his crusade against the dragons, but he did not heed them. The king saw only a chance for glory, and with it an opportunity to expand his army and his holdings. Yet, even among the Eldrien there were young and foolhearty warriors who followed the lure of glory and honor, and they too cast their lot with the Dragonslayer Knights.

"So the Dragonslayer Knights, in all their number, set off on an ill-fated crusade. Even Komesh himself joined the campaign, riding into the heart of Phana with Sir Celborn and the nine who followed him. Others turned north to explore Alran and the wilds beyond; still others rode to the border of Antaria to defend the eastern frontier. But not all they fought were dragons, for those knights who had journeyed so far found other prey as well--Goblins, Ogres, and Scaithi, as well as the wildmen and barbarian tribes. They were reckless in their ambition, and heedless in their quest for glory and renown.

"Yet not all the knights sought such a frivolous prize, and there were many with good heart who set out to do great deeds. Of those whom I've spoken, there was Sir Thaogwnn of Tilsha, who searched long to uncover the lost Lance of Lotaren. And there was Sir Jaemont of Armillia, who rode into legend in his epic struggle against the Scaithi onslaught. Also, there was the great battle-mage Sir Aegeron who, while having slain many dragons, earned his fame in the siege against the Vampire citadel of Varakarn. And I must not forget Amalet the Kaffrian, who, with Hanjaldr and the wizard Mzerael, took to the sky aboard the

enchanted flying ship Zygeros.

"In the end, the Dragonslayer Knights accomplished what they had set out to do. They drove the dragons back to the Carsovian Mountains and slew as many as half their number. But, in the wake of their campaign, they themselves were destroyed. Hundreds of knights perished in the cause, and thousands more died in the flames of their burning towns and villages. While the dragons may have been few in number, Komesh had underestimated their power--especially the power of the great and ancient dragons who ruled over the more common of their kind. Not one of the great dragon-kings were they able to kill; and it was they who destroyed the last of the knights. King Komesh himself is said to have challenged the mighty dragon Rathakex at his mountain-top nest, but he and his companions were never seen again. Some say Rathakex still lives somewhere far to the north, brooding in his cavernous layer.

"With the loss of King Komesh, what remained of the Dragonslayer Knights disbanded. Some returned to their own countries, and still others set off on their own to become knights-for-hire. While the king's son could have sworn to avenge his father and carry on the crusade, he instead chose the path of wisdom and declared the war to be over. Yet, there was no great victory, no triumphant procession, and no celebration for the heroes. There was only grieving and silence. Men had learned the fallacy of arrogance and the lesson of tolerance, while the dragons had tasted the bitter poison of vengeance. Never again would men and dragons war as they warred in those days, and peace again ruled over the land."

"Grandpapa, tell us another story!" Sylia exclaimed.

"Your Grandpapa is getting tired," he replied, leaning back in his chair.

"Please," the children begged at once.

"Tomorrow, then," he said. "Yes, tomorrow I shall tell you of the quest of Sir Thaogwnn."

The children whined at first, disappointed that they could not hear the story then and now. But just as quickly they returned to their games, and the old man smiled as he listened to them play.