## The George Business

Roger Zelazny

*This was an impulse story. I read somewhere—in* Locus, *I believe—that Orson Scott Card was putting together a collection of original stories involving dragons. I read it at just the right time. I was in the mood to do a story about a dragon. So I did. This is it.*

*I suppose we could have called this collection* From Unicorns to Dragons, *except that I just remembered an essay I once wrote which might serve more properly as the end piece.*

Deep in his lair, Dart twisted his green and golden length about his small hoard, his sleep troubled by dreams of a series of identical armored assailants. Since dragons’ dreams are always prophetic, he woke with a shudder, cleared his throat to the point of sufficient illumination to check on the state of his treasure, stretched, yawned and set forth up the tunnel to consider the strength of the opposition. If it was too great, he would simply flee, he decided. The hell with the hoard; it wouldn’t be the first time.

As he peered from the cave mouth, he beheld a single knight in mismatched armor atop a tired-looking gray horse, just rounding the bend. His lance was not even couched, but still pointing skyward.

Assuring himself that the man was unaccompanied, he roared and slithered forth.

“Halt,” he bellowed, “you who are about to fry!”

The knight obliged.

“You’re the one I came to see,” the man said. “I have—”

“Why,” Dart asked, “do you wish to start this business up again? Do you realize how long it has been since a knight and dragon have done battle?”

“Yes, I do. Quite a while. But I—”

“It is almost invariably fatal to one of the parties concerned. Usually your side.”

“Don’t I know it. Look, you’ve got me wrong—”

“I dreamt a dragon dream of a young man named George with whom I must do battle. You bear him an extremely close resemblance.”

“I can explain. It’s not as bad as it looks. You see—”

“*Is* your name George?”

“Well, yes. But don’t let that bother you—”

“It *does* bother me. You want my pitiful hoard? It wouldn’t keep you in beer money for the season. Hardly worth the risk.”

“I’m not after your hoard—”

“I haven’t grabbed off a virgin in centuries. They’re usually old and tough, anyhow, not to mention hard to find.”

“No one’s accusing—”

“As for cattle, I always go a great distance. I’ve gone out of my way, you might say, to avoid getting a bad name in my own territory.”

“I know you’re no real threat here. I’ve researched it quite carefully—”

“And do you think that armor will really protect you when I exhale my deepest, hottest flames?”

“Hell, no! So don’t do it, huh? If you’d please—”

“And that lance... You’re not even holding it properly.” George lowered the lance.

“On that you are correct,” he said, “but it happens to be tipped with one of the deadliest poisons known to Herman the Apothecary.”

“I say! That’s hardly sporting!”

“I know. But even if you incinerate me, I’ll bet I can scratch you before I go.”

“Now that would be rather silly—both of us dying like that—wouldn’t it?” Dart observed, edging away. “It would serve no useful purpose that I can see.”

“I feel precisely the same way about it.”

“Then why are we getting ready to fight?”

“I have no desire whatsoever to fight with you!”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand. You said your name is George, and I had this dream—”

“I can explain it.”

“But the poisoned lance—”

“Self-protection, to hold you off long enough to put a proposition to you.”

Dart’s eyelids lowered slightly.

“What sort of proposition?”

“I want to hire you.”

“Hire me? Whatever for? And what are you paying?”

“Mind if I rest this lance a minute? No tricks?”

“Go ahead. If you’re talking gold your life is safe.”

George rested his lance and undid a pouch at his belt. He dipped his hand into it and withdrew a fistful of shining coins. He tossed them gently, so that they clinked and shone in the morning light.

“You have my full attention. That’s a good piece of change there.”

“My life’s savings. All yours—in return for a bit of business.”

“What’s the deal?”

George replaced the coins in his pouch and gestured.

“See that castle in the distance—two hills away?”

“I’ve flown over it many times.”

“In the tower to the west are the chambers of Rosalind, daughter of the Baron Maurice. She is very dear to his heart, and I wish to wed her.”

“There’s a problem?”

“Yes. She’s attracted to big, brawny barbarian types, into which category I, alas, do not fall. In short, she doesn’t like me.”

“That *is* a problem.”

“So, if I could pay you to crash in there and abduct her, to bear her off to some convenient and isolated place and wait for me, I’ll come along, we’ll fake a battle, I’ll vanquish you, you’ll fly away and I’ll take her home. I am certain I will then appear sufficiently heroic in her eyes to rise from sixth to first position on her list of suitors. How does that sound to you?”

Dart sighed a long column of smoke.

“Human, I bear your kind no special fondness—particularly the armored variety with lances—so I don’t know why I’m telling you this... . Well, I do know, actually... But never mind. I could manage it, all right. But, if you win the hand of that maid, do you know what’s going to happen? The novelty of your deed will wear off after a time—and you know that there will be no encore. Give her a year, I’d say, and you’ll catch her fooling around with one of those brawny barbarians she finds so attractive. Then you must either fight him and be slaughtered or wear horns, as they say.”

George laughed.

“It’s nothing to me how she spends her spare time. I’ve a girlfriend in town myself.”

Dart’s eyes widened.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand...”

“She’s the old baron’s only offspring, and he’s on his last legs. Why else do you think an uncomely wench like that would have six suitors? Why else would I gamble my life’s savings to win her?”

“I see,” said Dart. “Yes, I can understand greed.”

“I call it a desire for security.”

“Quite. In that case, forget my simple-minded advice. All right, give me the gold and I’ll do it.” Dart gestured with one gleaming vane. “The first valley in those western mountains seems far enough from my home for our confrontation.”

“I’ll pay you half now and half on delivery.”

“Agreed. Be sure to have the balance with you, though, and drop it during the scuffle. I’ll return for it after you two have departed. Cheat me and I’ll repeat the performance, with a different ending.”

“The thought had already occurred to me.—Now, we’d better practice a bit, to make it look realistic. I’ll rush at you with the lance, and whatever side she’s standing on I’ll aim for it to pass you on the other. You raise that wing, grab the lance and scream like hell. Blow a few flames around, too.”

“I’m going to see you scour the tip of that lance before we rehearse this.”

“Right.—I’ll release the lance while you’re holding it next to you and rolling around. Then I’ll dismount and rush toward you with my blade. I’ll whack you with the flat of it—again, on the far side—a few times. Then you bellow again and fly away.”

“Just how sharp is that thing, anyway?”

“Damned dull. It was my grandfather’s. Hasn’t been honed since he was a boy.”

“And you drop the money during the fight?”

“Certainly.—How does that sound?”

“Not bad. I can have a few clusters of red berries under my wing, too. I’ll squash them once the action gets going.”

“Nice touch. Yes, do that. Let’s give it a quick rehearsal now and then get on with the real thing.”

“And don’t whack too hard...”

That afternoon, Rosalind of Maurice Manor was abducted by a green-and-gold dragon who crashed through the wall of her chamber and bore her off in the direction of the western mountains.

“Never fear!” shouted her sixth-ranked suitor—who just happened to be riding by—to her aged father who stood wringing his hands on a nearby balcony. “I’ll rescue her!” and he rode off to the west.

Coming into the valley where Rosalind stood backed into a rocky cleft, guarded by the fuming beast of gold and green, George couched his lance. “Release that maiden and face your doom!” he cried.

Dart bellowed, George rushed. The lance fell from his hands and the dragon rolled upon the ground, spewing gouts of fire into the air. A red substance dribbled from beneath the thundering creature’s left wing. Before Rosalind’s wide eyes, George advanced and swung his blade several times.

Ai.. and that!” he cried, as the monster stumbled to its feet and sprang into the air, dripping more red.

It circled once and beat its way off toward the top of the mountain, then over it and away.

“Oh George!” Rosalind cried, and she was in his arms. “Oh, George.. .”

He pressed her to him for a moment.

“I’ll take you home now,” he said.

That evening as he was counting his gold, Dart heard the sound of two horses approaching his cave. He rushed up the tunnel and peered out. George, now mounted on a proud white stallion and leading the gray, wore a matched suit of bright armor. He was not smiling, however. “Good evening,” he said.

“Good evening. What brings you back so soon?”

“Things didn’t turn out exactly as I’d anticipated.”

“You seem far better accoutered. I’d say your fortunes had taken a turn.”

“Oh, I recovered my expenses and came out a bit ahead. But that’s all. I’m on my way out of town. Thought I’d stop by and tell you the end of the story.—Good show you put on, by the way. It probably would have done the trick—”

“But—?”

“She was married to one of the brawny barbarians this morning, in their family chapel. They were just getting ready for a wedding trip when you happened by.”

“I’m awfully sorry.”

“Well, it’s the breaks. To add insult, though, her father dropped dead during your performance. My former competitor is now the new baron. He rewarded me with a new horse and armor, a gratuity and a scroll from the local scribe lauding me as a dragon slayer. Then he hinted rather strongly that the horse and my new reputation could take me far. Didn’t like the way Rosalind was looking at me now I’m a hero.”

“That is a shame. Well, we tried.”

“Yes. So I just stopped by to thank you and let you know how it all turned out. It would have been a good idea—if it had worked.”

“You could hardly have foreseen such abrupt nuptials.—You know, I’ve spent the entire day thinking about the affair. We *did* manage it awfully well.”

“Oh, no doubt about that. It went beautifully.”

“I was thinking... How’d you like a chance to get your money back?”

“What have you got in mind?”

“Uh—When I was advising you earlier that you might not be happy with the lady, I was trying to think about the situation in human terms. Your desire was entirely understandable to me otherwise. In fact, you think quite a bit like a dragon.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s rather amazing, actually. Now—realizing that it only failed because of a fluke, your idea still has considerable merit.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you.”

“There is—ah—a lovely lady of my own species whom I have been singularly unsuccessful in impressing for a long while now. Actually, there are an unusual number of parallels in our situations.”

“She has a large hoard, huh?”

“Extremely so.”

“Older woman?”

“Among dragons, a few centuries this way or that are not so important. But she, too, has other admirers and seems attracted by the more brash variety.”

“Uh-huh. I begin to get the drift. You gave me some advice once. I’ll return the favor. Some things are more important than hoards.”

“Name one.”

“My life. If I were to threaten her she might do me in all by herself, before you could come to her rescue.”

“No, she’s a demure little thing. Anyway, it’s all a matter of timing. I’ll perch on a hilltop nearby—I’ll show you where—and signal you when to begin your approach. Now, this time I have to win, of course. Here’s how we’ll work it...”

George sat on the white charger and divided his attention between the distant cave mouth and the crest of a high hill off to his left. After a time, a shining winged form flashed through the air and settled upon the hill. Moments later, it raised one bright wing.

He lowered his visor, couched his lance and started forward. When he came within hailing distance of the cave he cried out:

“I know you’re in there, Megtag! I’ve come to destroy you and make off with your hoard! You godless beast! Eater of children! This is your last day on earth!”

An enormous burnished head with cold green eyes emerged from the cave. Twenty feet of flame shot from its huge mouth and scorched the rock before it. George halted hastily. The beast looked twice the size of Dart and did not seem in the least retiring. Its scales rattled like metal as it began to move forward.

“Perhaps I exaggerated...” George began, and he heard the frantic flapping of giant vanes overhead.

As the creature advanced, he felt himself seized by the shoulders. He was borne aloft so rapidly that the scene below dwindled to toy size in a matter of moments. He saw his new steed bolt and flee rapidly back along the route they had followed.

“What the hell happened?” he cried.

“I hadn’t been around for a while,” Dart replied. “Didn’t know one of the others had moved in with her. You’re lucky I’m fast. That’s Pelladon. He’s a mean one.”

“Great. Don’t you think you should have checked first?”

“Sorry. I thought she’d take decades to make up her mind—without prompting. Oh, what a hoard! You should have seen it!”

“Follow that horse. I want him back.”

They sat before Dart’s cave, drinking.

“Where’d you ever get a whole barrel of wine?”

“Lifted it from a barge, up the river. I do that every now and then. I keep a pretty good cellar, if I do say so.”

“Indeed. Well, we’re none the poorer, really. We can drink to that.”

“True, but I’ve been thinking again. You know, you’re a very good actor.”

“Thanks. You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Now supposing—just supposing—you were to travel about. Good distances from here each time. Scout out villages, on the continent and in the isles. Find out which ones are well off and lacking in local heroes...”.

“Yes?”

“... And let them see that dragon-slaying certificate of yours. Brag a bit. Then come back with a list of towns. Maps, too.”

“Go ahead.”

“Find the best spots for a little harmless predation and choose a good battle site—”

“Refill?”

“Please.”

“Here.”

“Thanks. Then you show up, and for a fee—”

“Sixty-forty.”

“That’s what I was thinking, but I’ll bet you’ve got the figures transposed”

“Maybe fifty-five and forty-five then.”

“Down the middle, and let’s drink on it.”

“Fair enough. Why haggle?”

“Now I know why I dreamed of fighting a great number of knights, all of them looking like you. You’re going to make a name for yourself, George.”