

Dragon-Fighter

By Patricia Masson

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*Cursed is the country! · Kingless, nigh hopeless
Of any chance of change · in their cheerless doom
Of oppression and pain, · the people have suffered
long and with loathing, · for they lie in thrall
to a dread demon · Dragon and warrior
both he is, and baneful. · A blaze in the darkness
and in sudden slaughter · sleep is ended,
farmland and forest-land · with a flame-crop replanted
that rises, ripens, · reddens, and withers at last
to a drear desert · At the dawn's breaking
he shifts his shape, · shows now the semblance
of mocked humanity. · Men he has recruited
by force or fee · follow and serve him
and call him King. · With the coming of dark
and the fading of light, · as the falling sun's
undermost edge · meets the earth's far brink,
the linden-shield · lifted to protect him
and bloody broadsword · brandished in anger
to deal death-blows · drop in a moment
clattering in his clutches. · -- claws cannot grip them –
then his byrnie bursts · as his body grows vast,
and like scabs on his skin · scales are seen forming.
First of all his flesh · the fierce-eyed countenance
And haughty head · are wholly changed,
And while manlike on mould · the monster stands
A fell fountain of fire · forced from his grinning jaws,
Weapon of his worm-shape, · worse to contend with
Than sword-blade or spear-point, · seeks out its victim
Whose shape shrivels down · into sheer cinders
to be wafted away · on the winds of night.*

A stranger came striding by. · Destruction and harm
on all sides he saw, · and the sufferings of the people
grieved him greatly. · Grim in warfare
though young in years, · and used to battle
he would fight to set free · folk so tormented.
Others had ere this · uttered bold speeches
to the merciless monster; · maiming and slaughter
rewarded each of them. · They weakened in the fight
while the dragon-man endured. · Doughtier is this hero,
strong enough and steadfast · to withstand all harm
and by courage and cunning · conquer the enemy.
On a ruined riverbank, · to raven-blackness
Charred by dragon-breath, · he challenged the tyrant,
facing him fearlessly, · defying his menace;
waits now in that wasteland · his word to make good
either to fall in the field · or free them from their thraldom.

