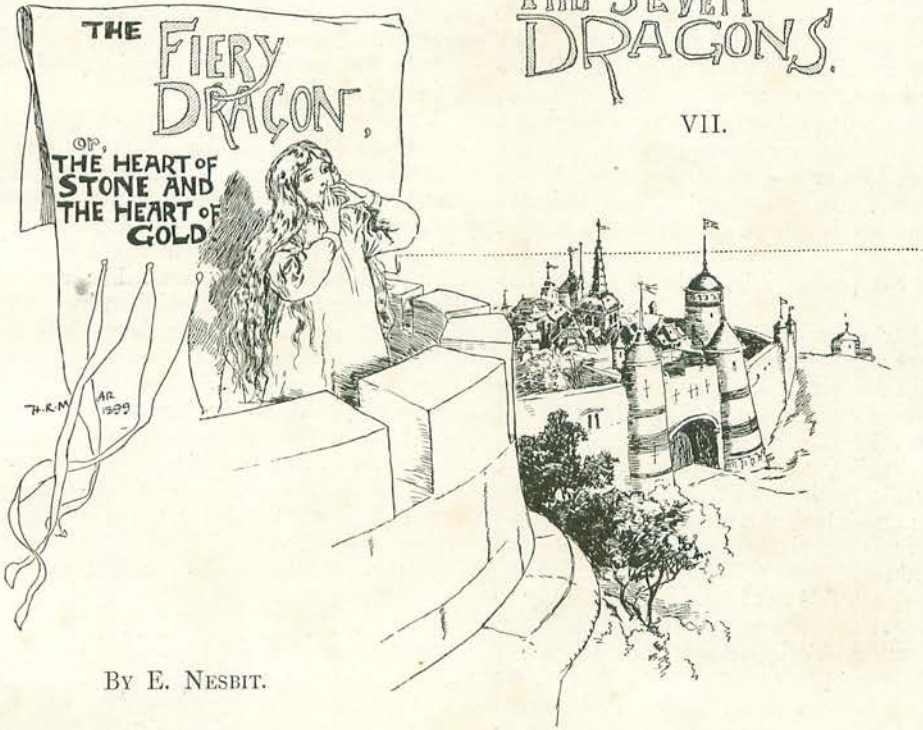


# THE SEVEN DRAGONS.

VII.



By E. NESBIT.



HE little white Princess always woke in her little white bed when the starlings began to chatter in the pearl-grey morning. As soon as the woods were awake, she used to run up the twisting turret-stairs with her little bare feet, and stand on the top of the tower in her white bed-gown, and kiss her hands to the sun and to the woods and to the sleeping town, and say: "Good morning, pretty world!"

Then she would run down the cold stone steps and dress herself in her short skirt and her cap and apron, and begin the day's work. She swept the rooms and made the breakfast, she washed the dishes and she scoured the pans, and all this she did because she was a real Princess. For of all who should have served her, only one remained faithful—her old nurse, who had lived with her in the tower all the Princess's life. And, now the nurse was old and feeble, the Princess would not let her work any more, but did all the housework herself, while nurse sat still and did the sewing, because this was a real

Princess with a skin like milk, and hair like flax and a heart like gold.

Her name was Sabrinetta, and her grandmother was Sabra, who married St. George after he had killed the dragon, and by real rights all the country belonged to her: the woods that stretched away to the mountains, and the downs that sloped down to the sea, and the pretty fields of corn and maize and rye, the olive orchards and the vineyards, and the little town itself with its towers and its turrets, its steep roofs and strange windows, that nestled in the hollow between the sea where the whirlpool was and the mountains, white with snow and rosy with sunrise.

But when her father and mother died, leaving her cousin to take care of the kingdom till she grew up, he, being a very evil Prince, had taken everything away from her, and all the people had followed him, and now nothing was left her of all her possessions except the great dragon-proof tower that her grandfather, St. George, had built, and of all who should have been her servants only the good nurse.

And this was why Sabrinetta was the first person in all the land to get a glimpse of the wonder.

Early, early, early, while all the townspeople were fast asleep, she ran up the turret-steps and looked out over the field, and at the other side of the field there is a green-fenny ditch and a rose-thorny hedge, and then comes the wood. And as Sabrinetta stood on her tower she saw a shaking and a twisting of the rose-thorny hedge, and then something very bright and shining wriggled out through it into the fenny ditch and back again. It only came out for a minute, but she saw it quite plainly, and she said to herself:—

“Dear me, what a curious, shiny, bright-looking creature! If it were bigger, and if I didn’t know that they have been fabulous monsters for quite a long time now, I should almost think it was a dragon.”

The thing, whatever it was, did look rather like a dragon—but then it was too small; and it looked rather like a lizard—only then it was too big. It was about as long as a hearthrug.

“I wish it had not been in such a hurry to get back into the wood,” said Sabrinetta. “Of course, it’s quite safe for me, in my dragon-proof tower; but if it is a dragon, it’s quite big enough to eat people, and to-day’s the first of May, and the children go out to get flowers in the wood.”

When Sabrinetta had done the housework (she did not leave so much as a speck of dust anywhere, even in the corneriest corner of the winding stair) she put on her milk-white silky gown with the moon-daisies worked on it, and went up to the top of her tower again.

Across the fields troops of children were going out to gather the may, and the sound of their laughter and singing came up to the top of the tower.

“I do hope it *wasn’t* a dragon,” said Sabrinetta.

The children went by twos and by threes and by tens and by twenties, and the red and blue and yellow and white of their frocks were scattered on the green of the field.

“It’s like a green silk

mantle worked with flowers,” said the Princess, smiling.

By twos and by threes, by tens and by twenties, the children vanished into the wood, till the mantle of the field was left plain green once more.

“All the embroidery is unpicked,” said the Princess, sighing.

The sun shone, and the sky was blue, and the fields were quite green, and all the flowers were very bright indeed, because it was May Day.

Then quite suddenly a cloud passed over the sun, and the silence was broken by shrieks from afar off; and, like a many-coloured torrent, all the children burst from the wood, and rushed, a red and blue and yellow and white wave, across the field, screaming as they ran. Their voices came up to the Princess on her tower, and she heard the words threaded on their screams, like beads on sharp needles:—

“The dragon, the dragon, the dragon! Open the gates! The dragon is coming! The fiery dragon!”

And they swept across the field and into



“ALL THE CHILDREN BURST FROM THE WOOD.”

the gate of the town, and the Princess heard the gate bang, and the children were out of sight—but on the other side of the field the rose-thorns crackled and smashed in the hedge, and something very large and glaring and horrible trampled the ferns in the ditch for one moment before it hid itself again in the covert of the wood.

The Princess went down and told her nurse, and the nurse at once locked the great door of the tower and put the key in her pocket.

“Let them take care of themselves,” she said, when the Princess begged to be allowed to go out and help to take care of the children. “My business is to take care of you, my precious, and I’m going to do it. Old as I am, I can turn a key still.”

So Sabrinetta went up again to the top of her tower, and cried whenever she thought of the children and the fiery dragon. For she knew, of course, that the gates of the town were not dragon-proof, and that the dragon could just walk in whenever he liked.

The children ran straight to the palace, where the Prince was cracking his hunting-whip down at the kennels, and told him what had happened.

“Good sport,” said the Prince, and he ordered out his pack of hippopotamuses at once. It was his custom to hunt big game with hippopotamuses, and people would not have minded that so much—but he would swagger about in the streets of the town with his pack yelping and gambolling at his heels, and, when he did that, the greengrocer, who had his stall in the market-place, always regretted it; and the crockery merchant, who spread his wares on the pavement, was ruined for life every time the Prince chose to show off his pack.

The Prince rode out of the town with his hippopotamuses trotting and frisking behind him, and people got inside their houses as quickly as they could when they heard the voices of his pack and the blowing of his horn. The pack squeezed through the town gates and off across country to hunt the dragon. Few of you who have not seen a pack of hippopotamuses in full cry will be able to imagine at all what the hunt was like. To begin with, hippopotamuses do not bay like hounds: they grunt like pigs, and their grunt is very big and fierce. Then, of course, no one expects hippopotamuses to jump. They just crash through the hedges and lumber through the standing corn, doing serious injury to the crops, and annoying the farmers very much. All the hippopotamuses

had collars with their name and address on, but when the farmers called at the palace to complain of the injury to their standing crops, the Prince always said it served them right for leaving their crops standing about in people’s way, and he never paid anything at all.

So now, when he and his pack went out, several people in the town whispered, “I wish the dragon would eat *him*”—which was very wrong of them, no doubt, but then he was such a very nasty Prince.

They hunted by field, and they hunted by wold; they drew the woods blank, and the scent didn’t lie on the downs at all. The dragon was shy, and would not show himself.

But just as the Prince was beginning to think there was no dragon at all, but only a cock and bull, his favourite old hippopotamus gave tongue. The Prince blew his horn and shouted:—

“Tally ho! Hark forward! Tantiy!” and the whole pack charged down hill towards the hollow by the wood. For there, plain to be seen, was the dragon, as big as a barge, glowing like a furnace, and spitting fire and showing his shining teeth.

“The hunt is up!” cried the Prince. And, indeed, it was. For the dragon—instead of behaving as a quarry should, and running away—ran straight at the pack, and the Prince on his elephant had the mortification of seeing his prize pack swallowed up one by one in the twinkling of an eye, by the dragon they had come out to hunt. The dragon swallowed all the hippopotamuses just as a dog swallows bits of meat. It was a shocking sight. Of the whole of the pack that had come out sporting so merrily to the music of the horn, now not even a puppy-hippopotamus was left, and the dragon was looking anxiously round to see if he had forgotten anything.

The Prince slipped off his elephant on the other side, and ran into the thickest part of the wood. He hoped the dragon could not break through the bushes there, since they were very strong and close. He went crawling on hands and knees in a most un-Prince-like way, and at last, finding a hollow tree, he crept into it. The wood was very still—no crashing of branches and no smell of burning came to alarm the Prince. He drained the silver hunting-bottle slung from his shoulder, and stretched his legs in the hollow tree. He never shed a single tear for his poor tame hippopotamuses who had eaten from his hand, and followed him faithfully in all the

pleasures of the chase for so many years. For he was a false Prince, with a skin like leather and hair like hearth-brushes, and a heart like a stone. He never shed a tear, but he just went to sleep. When he awoke it was dark. He crept out of the tree and rubbed his eyes. The wood was black about him, but there was a red glow in a dell close by, and it was a fire of sticks, and beside it sat a ragged youth with long, yellow hair; all round lay sleeping forms which breathed heavily.

"Who are you?" said the Prince.

"I'm Elfinn, the pig-keeper," said the ragged youth. "And who are you?"

"I'm Tiresome, the Prince," said the other.

"And what are you doing out of your palace at this time of night?" asked the pig-keeper, severely.

"I've been hunting," said the Prince.

The pig-keeper laughed. "Oh, it was you I saw, then? A good hunt, wasn't it? My pigs and I were looking on."

All the sleeping forms grunted and snored, and the Prince saw that they were pigs: he knew it by their manners.

"If you had known as much as I do," Elfinn went on, "you might have saved your pack."

"What do you mean?" said Tiresome.

"Why, the dragon," said Elfinn. "You went out at the wrong time of day. The dragon should be hunted at night."

"No, thank you," said the Prince, with a shudder. "A daylight hunt is quite good enough for me, you silly pig-keeper."

"Oh, well," said Elfinn, "do as you like about it—the dragon will come and hunt *you* to-morrow, as likely as not. I don't care if he does, you silly Prince."

"You're very rude," said Tiresome.

"Oh, no, only truthful," said Elfinn.

"Well, tell me the truth, then. What is it that if I had known as much as you do about I shouldn't have lost my hippopotamuses?"

"You don't speak very good English," said Elfinn; "but, come, what will you give me if I tell you?"

"If you tell me what?" said the tiresome Prince.

"What you want to know."

"I don't want to know anything," said Prince Tiresome.

"Then you're more of a silly even than I thought," said Elfinn. "Don't you want to know how to settle the dragon before he settles you?"

"It might be as well," the Prince admitted.

"Well, I haven't much patience at any time," said Elfinn, "and now I can assure you that there's very little left. What will you give me if I tell you?"

"Half my kingdom," said the Prince, "and my cousin's hand in marriage."

"Done," said the pig-keeper; "here goes! *The dragon grows small at nights!* He sleeps under the root of this tree. I use him to light my fire with."

And, sure enough, there under the tree was the dragon on a nest of scorched moss, and he was about as long as your finger.

"How can I kill him?" asked the Prince.

"I don't know that you *can* kill him," said Elfinn; "but you can take him away if you've brought anything to put him in. That bottle of yours would do."



"THEY MADE IT CREEP INTO THE SILVER HUNTING-BOTTLE."

So between them they managed, with bits of stick and by singeing their fingers a little, to poke and shove the dragon till they made it creep into the silver hunting-bottle, and then the Prince screwed on the top tight.

"Now we've got him," said Elfinn, "let's take him home and put Solomon's seal on the mouth of the bottle, and then he'll be safe enough. Come along—we'll divide up the kingdom to-morrow, and then I shall have some money to buy fine clothes to go courting in."

But when the wicked Prince made promises he did not make them to keep.

"Go on with you! What do you mean?" he said. "I found the dragon and I've imprisoned him. I never said a word about courtings or kingdoms. If you say I did, I shall cut your head off at once." And he drew his sword.

"All right," said Elfinn, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm better off than you are, anyhow."

"What do you mean?" spluttered the Prince.

"Why, you've only got a kingdom (and a dragon), but I've got clean hands (and five-and-seventy fine black pigs)."

So Elfinn sat down again by his fire, and the Prince went home and told his Parliament how clever and brave he had been, and though he woke them up on purpose to tell them, they were not angry, but said:—

"You are indeed brave and clever." For they knew what happened to people with whom the Prince was not pleased.

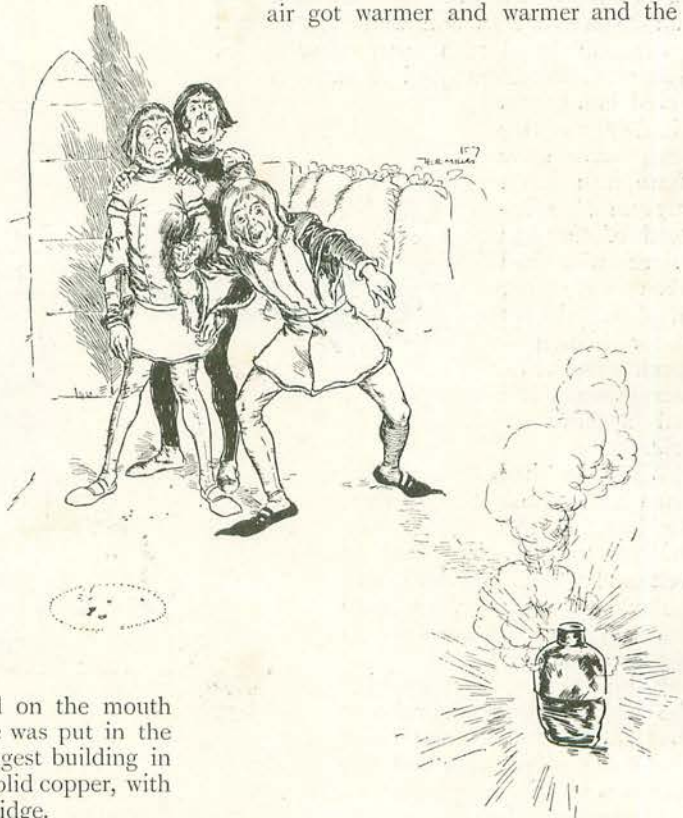
Then the Prime Minister solemnly put Solomon's seal on the mouth of the bottle, and the bottle was put in the treasury, which was the strongest building in the town, and was made of solid copper, with walls as thick as Waterloo Bridge.

The bottle was set down among the sacks of gold, and the junior secretary to the junior clerk of the last Lord of the Treasury was appointed to sit up all night with it, and see if anything happened. The junior secretary had never seen a dragon, and, what was more, he did not believe the Prince had ever seen a dragon either. The Prince had never

been a really truthful boy, and it would have been just like him to bring home a bottle with nothing in it, and then to pretend that there was a dragon inside. So the junior secretary did not at all mind being left. They gave him the key, and when everyone in the town had gone back to bed he let in some of the junior secretaries from other Government departments, and they had a jolly game of hide-and-seek among the sacks of gold, and played marbles with the diamonds and rubies and pearls in the big ivory chests.

They enjoyed themselves very much, but by-and-by the copper treasury began to get warmer and warmer, and suddenly the junior secretary cried out, "Look at the bottle!"

The bottle sealed with Solomon's seal had swollen to three times its proper size, and seemed to be nearly red hot, and the air got warmer and warmer and the



"THE JUNIOR SECRETARY CRIED OUT, 'LOOK AT THE BOTTLE!'"

bottle bigger and bigger, till all the junior secretaries agreed that the place was too hot to hold them, and out they went, tumbling over each other in their haste, and just as the last got out and locked the door the bottle burst, and out came the dragon, very fiery,

and swelling more and more every minute, and he began to eat the sacks of gold, and crunch up the pearls and diamonds and rubies, as you do "hundreds and thousands."

By breakfast-time he had devoured the whole of the Prince's treasures, and when the Prince came along the street at about eleven, he met the dragon coming out of the broken door of the treasury, with molten gold still dripping from his jaws. Then the Prince turned and ran for his life, and as he ran towards the dragon-proof tower the little white Princess saw him coming, and she ran down and unlocked the door and let him in, and slammed the dragon-proof door in the fiery face of the dragon, who sat down and whined outside, because he wanted the Prince very much indeed.

The Princess took Prince Tiresome into the best room, and laid the cloth, and gave him cream and eggs and white grapes and honey and bread, with many other things, yellow and white and good to eat, and she served him just as kindly as she would have done if he had been anyone else instead of the bad Prince who had taken away her kingdom and kept it for himself—because she was a true Princess and had a heart of gold.

When he had eaten and drunk he begged the Princess to show him how to lock and unlock the door, and the nurse was asleep, so there was no one to tell the Princess not to, and she did.

"You turn the key like this," she said, "and the door keeps shut. But turn it nine times round the wrong way, and the door flies open."

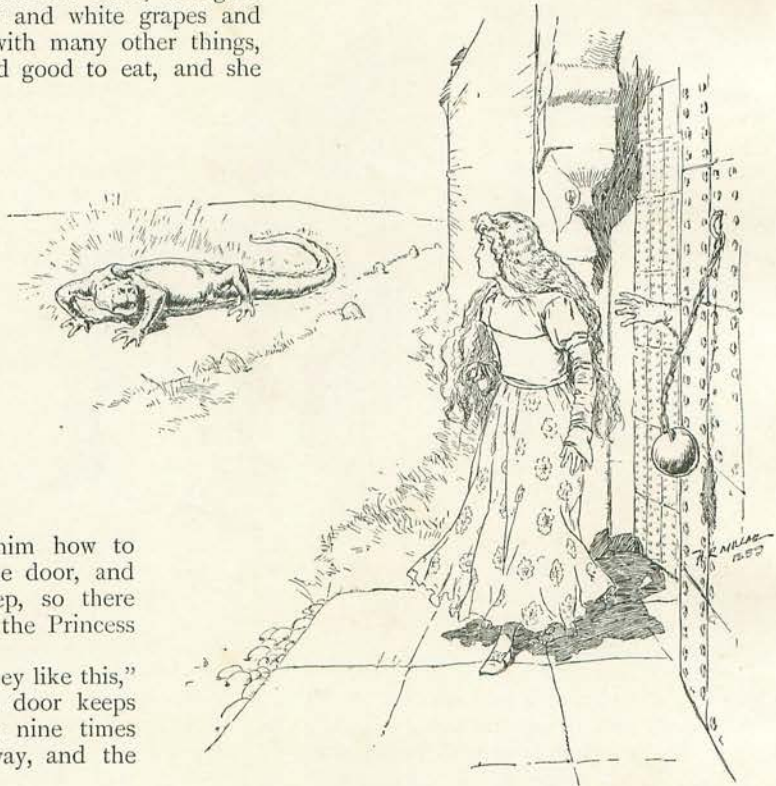
And so it did. And the moment it opened the Prince pushed the white Princess out of her tower, just as he had pushed her out of her kingdom, and shut the door. For he wanted to have the tower all for himself. And there she was in the street, and on the other side of the way the dragon was sitting whining, but he did not try to eat her, because—though the old nurse did not

know it—dragons cannot eat white Princesses with hearts of gold.

The Princess could not walk through the streets of the town in her milky-silky gown with the daisies on it, and with no hat and no gloves, so she turned the other way, and ran out across the meadows, towards the wood. She had never been out of her tower before, and the soft grass under her feet felt like grass of Paradise.

She ran right into the thickest part of the wood, because she did not know what her heart was made of, and she was afraid of the dragon, and there in a dell she came on Elfinn and his five-and-seventy fine pigs. He was playing his flute, and around him the pigs were dancing cheerfully on their hind legs.

"Oh, dear," said the Princess, "do take care of me. I am so frightened."



"THE PRINCE PUSHED THE WHITE PRINCESS OUT OF HER TOWER."

"I will," said Elfinn, putting his arms round her. "Now you are quite safe. What were you frightened of?"

"The dragon," said she.

"So it's got out of the silver bottle," said Elfinn. "I hope it's eaten the Prince."

"No," said Sabrinetta; "but why?"

So he told her of the mean trick that the Prince had played him.

"And he promised me half his kingdom and the hand of his cousin the Princess," said Elfinn.

"Oh, dear, what a shame!" said Sabrinetta, trying to get out of his arms. "How dared he?"

"What's the matter?" he asked, holding her tighter; "it *was* a shame, or at least I thought so. But *now* he may keep his kingdom, half and whole, if I may keep what I have."

"What's that?" asked the Princess.

"Why, you—my pretty, my dear," said Elfinn, "and as for the Princess, his cousin—forgive me, dearest heart, but when I asked for her I hadn't seen the real Princess, the only Princess, *my* Princess."

"Do you mean me?" said Sabrinetta.

"Who else?" he asked.

"Yes, but five minutes ago you hadn't seen me!"

"Five minutes ago I was a pig-keeper—now I've held you in my arms I'm a Prince, though I should have to keep pigs to the end of my days."

"But you haven't asked *me*," said the Princess.

"*You* asked *me* to take care of you," said Elfinn, "and I will—all my life long."

So that was settled, and they began to talk of really important things, such as the dragon and the Prince, and all the time Elfinn did not know that this was the Princess, but he knew that she had a heart of gold: and he told her so, many times.

"The mistake," said Elfinn, "was in not having a dragon-proof bottle. I see that now."

"Oh, is that all?" said the Princess. "I can easily get you one of those—because everything in my tower is dragon-proof. We ought to do something to settle the dragon and save the little children."

So she started off to get the bottle, and she would not let Elfinn come with her.

"If what you say is true," she said—"if you are sure that I have a heart of gold, the dragon won't hurt me, and somebody *must* stay with the pigs."

Elfinn was quite sure, so he let her go.

She found the door of her tower open. The dragon had waited patiently for the Prince, and the moment he opened the door and came out, though he was only out for an instant to post a letter to his Prime Minister, saying where he was, and asking them to send the fire brigade to deal with the fiery

dragon, the dragon ate him. Then the dragon went back to the wood, because it was getting near his time to grow small for the night.

So Sabrinetta went in and kissed her nurse, and made her a cup of tea and explained what was going to happen, and that she had a heart of gold, so the dragon couldn't eat her; and the nurse saw that, of course, the Princess was quite safe, and kissed her and let her go.

She took the dragon-proof bottle, made of burnished brass, and ran back to the wood, and to the dell where Elfinn was sitting among his sleek black pigs, waiting for her.

"I thought you were never coming back," he said; "you have been away a year, at least."

The Princess sat down beside him among the pigs, and they held each other's hands till it was dark, and then the dragon came crawling over the moss, scorching it as he came, and getting smaller as he crawled, and curled up under the root of the tree.

"Now, then," said Elfinn, "you hold the bottle"—then he poked and prodded the dragon with bits of stick till it crawled into the dragon-proof bottle. But there was no stopper.

"Never mind," said Elfinn, "I'll put my finger in for a stopper."

"No, let me," said the Princess; but, of course, Elfinn would not let her. He stuffed his finger into the top of the bottle, and the Princess cried out:—

"The sea—the sea—run for the cliffs!" And off they went, with the five-and-seventy pigs trotting steadily after them in a long, black procession.

The bottle got hotter and hotter in Elfinn's hands, because the dragon inside was puffing fire and smoke with all his might. Hotter, and hotter, and hotter, but Elfinn held on till they came to the cliff-edge, and there was the dark-blue sea, and the whirlpool going round and round.

Elfinn lifted the bottle high above his head and hurled it out between the stars and the sea, and it fell in the middle of the whirlpool.

"We've saved the country," said the Princess. "You've saved the little children. Give me your hands."

"I can't," said Elfinn; "I shall never be able to take your dear hands again. My hands are burnt off."

And so they were: there were only black cinders where his hands ought to have been. The Princess kissed them, and cried over



"ELFINN HURLED IT OUT."

them, and tore pieces of her silky-milky gown to tie them up with, and the two went back to the tower and told the nurse all about everything. And the pigs sat outside and waited.

"He is the bravest man in the world," said Sabrinetta. "He has saved the country and the little children; but, oh, his hands—his poor, dear, darling hands!"

Here the door of the room opened, and the oldest of the five-and-seventy pigs came in. It went up to Elfinn and rubbed itself against him with little, loving grunts.

"See the dear creature," said the nurse, wiping away a tear; "it knows, it knows!"

Sabrinetta stroked the pig, because Elfinn had no hands for stroking or for anything else.

"The only cure for a dragon burn," said the old nurse, "is pig's fat, and well that faithful creature knows it—"

"I wouldn't for a kingdom," cried Elfinn, stroking the pig as best he could with his elbow,

"Is there no other cure?" asked the Princess.

Here another pig put its black nose in at the door, and then another and another, till the room was full of pigs, a surging mass of rounded blackness, pushing and struggling to get at Elfinn, and grunting softly in the language of true affection.

"There is *one* other," said the nurse; "the dear, affectionate beasts—they all want to die for you."

"What *is* the other cure?" said Sabrinetta, anxiously.

"If a man is burnt by a dragon," said the nurse, "and a certain number of people are willing to die for him, it is enough if each

should kiss the burn, and wish it well in the depths of his loving heart."

"The number! The number!" cried Sabrinetta.

"Seventy-seven," said the nurse.

"We have only seventy-five pigs," said the Princess, "and with me that's seventy-six!"

"It must be seventy-seven—and I really *can't* die for him, so nothing can be done," said the nurse, sadly. "He must have cork hands."

"I knew about the seventy-seven loving people," said Elfinn. "But I never thought my dear pigs loved me so much as all this, and my dear, too— And, of course, that only makes it more impossible. There's *one* other charm that cures dragon burns, though; but I'd rather be burnt black all over than marry anyone but you, my dear, my pretty."

"Why, who must you marry to cure your dragon burns?" asked Sabrinetta.

"A Princess. That's how St. George cured *his* burns."

"There now! think of that!" said the nurse. "And I never heard tell of that cure—old as I am."

But Sabrinetta threw her arms round



Elfinn's neck, and held him as though she would never let him go.

"Then it's all right, my dear, brave, precious Elfinn," she cried, "for I *am* a Princess, and you shall be my Prince. Come along, nurse—don't wait to put on your bonnet. We'll go and be married this very moment."

So they went, and the pigs came after, moving in stately blackness, two by two. And, the minute he was married to the

all the sea were not enough to cool him. The whirlpool is too strong for him to be able to get out of it, so there he spins round and round for ever and ever, doing some useful work at last, and warming the water for poor fisher-folk to shave with.

The Prince and Princess rule the land well and wisely. The nurse lives with them, and does nothing but fine sewing, and only that when she wants to very much. The Prince



Princess, Elfinn's hands got quite well. And the people, who were weary of Prince Tiresome and his hippopotamuses, hailed Sabrinetta and her husband as rightful Sovereigns of the land.

Next morning the Prince and Princess went out to see if the dragon had been washed ashore. They could see nothing of him; but when they looked out towards the whirlpool they saw a cloud of steam; and the fishermen reported that the water for miles round was hot enough to shave with! And as the water is hot there to this day, we may feel pretty sure that the fierceness of that dragon was such that all the waters of

"THEY SAW A CLOUD OF STEAM."

keeps no hippopotamuses, and is consequently very popular. The five-and-seventy devoted pigs live in white marble sties with brass knockers and "Pig" on the door-plate, and are washed twice a day with Turkish sponges and soap scented with violets, and no one objects to *their* following the Prince when he walks abroad, for they behave beautifully, and always keep to the footpath, and obey the notices about not walking on the grass. The Princess feeds them every day with her own hands, and her first edict on coming to the throne was that the word "Pork" should never be uttered on pain of death, and should, besides, be scratched out of all the dictionaries!