

## Dragon Claus

by Stephen L. Rice

“Name, please,” the figure in the helm rasped.

George had seen such helms before, of course, just not on minor bureaucrats. “George—Saint George, technically, but I don’t like to—”

“Neither do we. We don’t mind religion, you understand; Pharisees and Sadducees, so crunchy and...” The voice broke off abruptly, then resumed. “I mean, religion leads to lawsuits, you know.”

“Ah, yes. Well, I disagree, in fact, but lawsuits are distasteful.”

“No, no—they’re delicious! Pain and suffering, hatred, revenge...” Steam rose as drool fell. “It’s just so distracting.”

“If you will pardon my saying so, you are slaving.”

“Slavery? Mmm, yes—traffic in the bodies and souls of... Wait! I don’t drool, you...” The figure strangled the sentence and produced a flask. The label said something like “Angel of Light Nice Rinse.” A quick swig led to a quick gargle and a discreet spit toward the floor. Indiscreet flames billowed up from the spot.

George wasn’t paying much attention, however, for he had just confirmed a suspicion: the figure’s helm had risen nearly two inches since the interview began, though the ascent had now stalled.

Meanwhile, the creature coughed and burbled in a strange falsetto, “Ooh, now, that’s better!” A few smiley-face bubbles wandered in George’s direction. He thought one winked at him before it burst.

“So you’re George,” the high-pitched purr continued. “I’m Bub. Bill Z. Bub.” A cloud of flies rose at this statement. The figure jabbed a button on the desk, and a giant swatter emerged and performed its function. More bubble-laden laughter followed. “Ooh, I don’t know *why* that keeps happening.” The helm headed slowly for the ceiling again.

“Your helm keeps rising, Mr. Boob,” George observed with a straight face.

“What, again?” Another jabbed button, and a large mallet swooped down and put the helm back to its original height—or lower. Horns sprouted from either side. “Da—” a gruff voice began, but a hiccup interrupted, and the falsetto resumed as more bubbles crept from under the helm’s edge. “My stars! I shall have to have that silly spring adjusted!”

“That looked painful, Mr. Boob,” George commented.

“Oh, it’s nothing. The ringing just makes it hard to think. And it’s ‘Bub,’ not ‘Boob.’ Bill Z. Bub.”

“Could you write that for me?”

The figure obliged, but the result was shaky. “Maybe you’re the sort whose cursive is better than his printing,” George suggested. He slid his job form into a convenient location, and the creature autographed it. George reflected that his job had become far simpler once he realized how much latitude “wise as a serpent” gave him. “That’s better. So, ‘Bill Z. Bub,’ eh?”

“Just call me Bub.”

“Well, Bub, your horns are poking out of your helm.”

“What? Well, you see... It’s a Viking helmet! Yeah! It’s supposed to have horns.”

“They weren’t there before.”

“It’s a late bloomer.”

“I also thought the horned Viking helmets were a myth of popular culture.”

“Watch what you’re saying! There’s nothing wrong with popular culture—some of my best friends are in Hollywood. You can trust them.”

A soft splock announced that the horns had finally lifted the helm from the bureaucrat’s bean. “That’s better. Now, we have only one opening at the moment. It’s up north—quite a pleasant place. We just need some muscle to keep the malcontents in line.”

“Your horns are about to remove your hat completely.”

Bub began rummaging through some papers on his desk. “Some people, it’s noses; with me, it’s horns,” he replied absently. The horns stopped growing. “Where did your application go?”

“I have it here. It’s mostly filled in, and I can take care of the rest.”

“Not without my signature, you won’t. Here, I’ll start over. Your name is George. Occupation?”

“Dragon-slayer.”

“What!” The falsetto was utterly gone. Bub’s explosion incinerated his desk, and, by equal and opposite reaction, fired him into the ceiling with a loud thunk, his head again crammed into his headwear.

“If those horns were part of your helmet,” George remarked, “your weight would probably pull you loose.”

“My helmet’s just really snug—especially after it’s pounded down around my shoulders.”

The remark provoked a slight downward motion.

“Much as I dislike encouraging dishonesty,” George said, “a few whoppers could lower you to the floor. Or you could pray, if you want a better solution.”

“I pray in my own way,” Bub retorted, and his shoulders popped free. As George left, he heard, “I love my job,” followed by another splock.

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“Help! I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up!” the old lady called.

The picture froze, and a sincere, sympathetic smile attached to a manlike form came on screen. “They always tell us, ‘I don’t want to be a burden.’ Well, we all know that if you help them up, they’ll just fall down again. If that isn’t being a burden, what is? Fortunately, we at LifeAvert, pioneers in alleviating the burden of life, have a solution.”

The picture resumed, and the woman pushed a button on a handy brooch—and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Problem solved!” the announcer’s voice continued gleefully. “Ask about our larger, vacuum model of Geezer-B-Gone—it sucks up the cremains for a keepsake.”

A young woman’s voice took over. “Call now—operators are poised, ready to pounce.”

The TV went the way of the old lady.

“Idiots!” the dragon roared, seething. “Operators are ‘standing by.’ Everyone knows that. Even if they’re really sitting on their mythogenic duffs in a call center somewhere, they’re still ‘standing by.’ I’d better call — Hey, who are you?”

“The name’s George. St. George.”

“The dragon-slayer?”

St. George nodded. “I slay dragons.”

“Not this dragon. You don’t even have a sword.”

“I don’t need one. You are trespassing, and this draconophany of yours must end.”

“There are theophanies and Christophanies; why should my draconophany be forbidden?”

“I won’t bother explaining. Perhaps you’ll have an epiphany—though I doubt it.”

“Aren’t you even going to ask my name? I thought your kind always did.”

“I thought your kind always lied, so the answer would be worthless. Nor do I see any reason to perpetuate a superstition based on

the supposed magic power of names. I have authority over you already, based on a name I know, not on one I don't care about."

"Then destroy me now—if you can."

"The time has not yet come. You shall destroy yourself."

"You don't know who you're dealing with. They used to call me 'A bad-un'; now they'll call me 'Appallin'-un.'"

"No argument there. And you'd better not try marketing that device to kill the elderly."

The dragon sighed. "Why not? From in the womb to near the tomb, I'll kill everyone I can, even if it means dealing with an incompetent ad agency. It's a matter of principle: stealing, killing, and destroying always come first. Business before pleasure."

"You're making my business a pleasure."

The dragon laughed. "Go talk to your fellow fool. Perhaps he can teach you proper despair before you die. Meanwhile, just because I enjoy gambling with other people's lives, I'll flip a coin on the Geezer-B-Gone."

He pulled out what looked like a two-headed coin and prepared to toss it.

Scowling, George turned and headed for the door. As he was leaving, he heard, "Aww... Kaboom! Bwahaha!"

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George slid easily into the booth. St. Nicholas glanced at him placidly and slid his fingers over the handle of his mug. It was half empty or half full, depending on one's mindset.

"How many of those have you had, sir?" George asked.

"Only the one. When I feel weary, I come here and watch others struggle with their troubles. It makes me feel better to know I'm not alone. And a mug of stout helps."

"Stout?"

"You are what you drink. I refuse to let them take that from me, even if they ban trans fats."

Just then a hunchback shot past, followed by an angry mob of cheerleaders. He leaped for a dangling cord and began to climb, taking the end of the rope with him. The screaming girls swiftly formed a pyramid and might have caught him if they hadn't argued over who got the top spot.

The hunchback moaned, "The belles! The belles! They deafen me!" and retreated upward.

“If he thinks the girls are bad, the bell up there will be far worse,” George said. “In fact, I wonder why it hasn’t sounded yet.”

A waiter appeared. “Not at all, Signore. Is-a no bell; is-a bell-free.”

George groaned and asked for a wine list. “What’s going on here, Nick? This should be a chapel, not a bar. And where’d the hunchback come from?”

“Kindly refrain from calling me ‘Nick,’” the other saint said. “That’s how all this got started. Poor Quasimodo should never have been here at all. I warned him not to try the jealousy trick on those girls. He told each of them he was going out with the others, and they didn’t take it charitably. Now the whole school thinks they’re dating him, and their reputation has plummeted as his has risen.”

“I thought he was deaf,” George remarked, pointing out a selection to the waiter.

“He was, but he got a CD series on how to lip-read. It’s by the same people who wrote the *Teach Yourself to Read* book.”

“Ah, yes—‘We guarantee that if you read this book, you will be literate.’ But how did the CDs work?”

“Only too well. Once you can read lips on audio, you can nearly read minds. The girls would never have surprised him if he wasn’t such a slow reader.”

“Still, he’s a fictional character.”

“So are elves. So is Santa Claus. This is part of a long-running experiment to transform pagan culture from within. But it’s become warped: we started with mythic figures, descended slightly to literary characters, and now we’ve regressed to pop culture. I’ve managed to keep it humorous so far, but I hate to think where it’ll end.”

“But what’s all this about?”

“It’s part of a scheme to ruin Christmas—and perhaps more. I assume you’ve met the new owner.”

“Yes. He didn’t seem like your kind. How did he do it?”

“Copyright infringement, identity theft—there were so many charges, I’m not sure which of them stuck. But the gist of it was that my ‘St. Nick’ somehow infringed on his ‘Old Nick,’ and he demanded a controlling interest in operations here. His lawyers kept ranting and raving until he got it.”

“The Devil!” George growled.

A tiny creature with pointy horns and ears appeared. “Good evening. I’m Dybbuk, and I’ll be your imp ton—”

George cut it short with a punch that sent it across the room with a sound like a startled squeaky toy, narrowly missing the returning waiter. There it encountered a statue of St. Michael giving the Devil what

for, and it emerged on the other side of the archangel's blade as twin puffs of smoke. The statue winked briefly. *Always there when you need him*, George mused.

George turned back to his colleague. "But why does he want control here? What good does it do him?"

"Ruining Christmas for a lot of people, which could promote less-spiritual alternatives. But there could be more. As Saints, we stand partly outside of Time, almost like our Lord, and we can still affect the world. I think he means to use me to contaminate the world through the ages."

George took the wineglass the waiter now timidly proffered and set it on the table. "But he can't travel through time or even send a message back warning of things to come."

"No, but part of our role as Saints is to spread God's love and joy—his kingdom—through the world in all its ages. That's how the creation is taken up into the Creator in the final glorification. But I think the Enemy hopes to use me to spread confusion and despair instead. And then there's the matter of corrupting the culture by debasing mythic and literary entities—the Enemy could use this to make Hollywood even worse."

"The Devil!" George exclaimed, bringing his fist down on the table beside his glass.

Another tiny creature poofed into view. "Good evening. I'm..." It paused, then squeaked, "You aren't going to hit me, are you?"

"By no means," George reassured the thing. Then he emptied a small flask of holy water on it.

The imp fell to the floor. "I'm melting! Melting!"

"Do it quietly, then."

"Sorry," the imp croaked as it drained into a crack.

"Must you keep doing that?" St. Nicholas asked.

"I have my reasons. Third time's the charm, they say." George sipped his drink. "But you think that this is just another attempt by the Enemy to make everyone else as miserable as he is. He really is a loser."

"In every sense. I suppose you're here to stop him, though how you can do it without a sword is beyond me."

"David slew Goliath without a sword. The Lord will provide a way for me to do my work, too. I slay dragons one way or another." George took another sip. "I assume that killing the dragon will solve the problems?"

"It should. It will banish him from here, anyway, and his minions will follow. That's good enough."

“Then let’s see what we’re up against,” St. George said, draining his glass. “I dislike being a sitting duck.”

St. Nicholas led him outside and pointed out some huge smokestacks nearby. “We never used to generate that much smoke, and I think this is from Appallin’-un himself. They never smoke much unless he’s in his office.”

“But that’s just a minor nuisance, isn’t it?”

“I wish it were. Here’s the problem.” St. Nicholas led him to a sleigh, and it took George a moment to figure out what was odd about it.

“Where are the reins and harnesses?”

“Gone, just like the reindeer. Animal-rights groups said it was wrong to work them like that, and the elves flat-out refused to substitute for them. So the new boss brought this in. It’s made of nuclear-bonded fruitcake, so it’s completely indestructible and can be practically everywhere at once.”

“Two of the attributes of deity; not bad.”

“No charity or wisdom, though, and that’s the trouble. Its navigational system seeks out chimneys based on their heat.”

“The smokestacks!” St. George exclaimed. “You mean the sleigh runs into them?”

“Exactly. The thing’s been getting faster each time, and nimble as I am, I estimate that in another two or three trips at most I won’t be able to give with a nod in time. Then I may be banished from here for a while—and who knows what devilry will occur in the meantime.”

George smiled grimly as inspiration began to dawn. “The Devil!” he muttered.

Appallin’-un emerged from a puff of smoke. “My imps said they were all busy, so I thought I’d appear myself. In the sleigh, Santa—it should do Mach two this time. As for you, George, we have a long-overdue chat ahead, dragon to dragon chow.”

St. Nicholas began to protest, but St. George smiled and winked, so he got in for his final ride. Almost immediately he was swept up into the sky.

“Why thank you, hero,” the dragon said. “Just for that, I’ll allow you a final wish.”

The long-awaited peace [*sic*] finally slipped into place. “Would you mind using some mouthwash before you blast me? That Nice Rinse seems effective.”

“Fool! Do you think I’d use that sissy smiley stuff for an execution? That’s for deceptions only, and this won’t be a lie. But since you unwisely forgot to specify which mouthwash in your wish—you only suggested one

—I think I'll try some Thermonuclear Tonic instead and blast you properly.”

St. George looked devastated as the dragon began gargling, spewing flame in the process. Then the saint fled the scene at top speed. He heard a loud thud, and the dragon crashed to earth just behind him, followed by the cursed sleigh.

“Brilliant, Brother!” St. Nicholas called as he floated down. “When he gargled, he was much hotter than the smokestacks.”

The dragon sank into the snow and disappeared while St. Nicholas completed his descent. “But how could you be sure the sleigh would kill him?”

St. George smiled. “It’s my job, Brother. You see, I sleigh dragons.”