



*Penelope never behaved as beautiful princesses should.*

A dragon with exceedingly evil intentions was plaguing the Palace of Hexagon. Night and day he lurked about the courtyard walls, belching fire and smoke and roaring in a most terrible fashion. Things looked bad for the royal household.

"Mercy," said the queen.

"Dear me," said the king. "One of these days he'll get a royal blaze going, and when he does—poof! That'll be it."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" asked the queen sharply. "I mean, you can't just sit there counting out your money and ignoring the problem."

"I have asked every brave man in the kingdom to slay the dragon," said the king. "They all said they had more important things to do."

"Nonsense," said the queen with a breathy sigh. "What could be more important than

saving the palace from a monstrous dragon? Perhaps you should offer a reward."

"I *have* offered a reward," said the king. "No one seems interested."

"Well, then, offer something of value to go with it," said the queen. And with that, she slammed the honey jar on the table and stomped out of the room.

"I'll slay the dragon," said the Princess Penelope, jumping from behind an antique suit of armor. There, she had just happened to be listening to the conversation while oiling a rusty joint.

The king blinked his eyes twice—once with shock, because he was taken by surprise, and once with pride, because he was taken by his daughter's dazzling beauty. "You can't slay a dragon," he said. "Why don't you go knit a vest for the palace poodle or something?"

The princess flexed the arm of the ancient armor. "See? No more clink." She smiled.

"No more clink," said the king vacantly.

"And I just fixed the drawbridge, too," said

the princess. "You won't have to worry about the clank anymore."

"Clink, clank, clunk," said the king. "I have more important worries anyway."

"I know," said Penelope. "The dragon. I *said* I'd slay him for you."

"Nonsense," said the king. "Young ladies don't slay dragons."

"They don't oil armor or fix drawbridges, either," said the princess matter-of-factly.

The king scratched his head and thought about that for a while. Princess Penelope was always giving him something to think about. For one thing, he thought her beauty was unsurpassed by that of any princess on earth. For another, it seemed she never behaved as beautiful princesses should.

"Slaying dragons is men's work," he said finally, "and that's that."

The princess didn't really think that was that. But she knew her father did. So she said no more about it—to him, anyway.

It seemed to her that a young lady could do anything she wanted, if she set her mind to it. And in her tender years she had set her mind to many things the king and queen had said only men could do.

She once whittled a whistle from a green willow stick when she was supposed to be sewing a fine seam.

She once built a birdhouse for the palace puffin when she was supposed to be practicing her lute lesson.

And once she even killed a mouse. She had come into the bedchamber to find her mother standing on a chair and screaming—as queens do in the presence of mice. "Don't worry, Mother, I'll get him," Penelope said.

"Young ladies don't kill mice," the queen said. "For heaven's sake, stand on a chair and scream along with me."

But Penelope didn't stand on a chair and scream. She caught the mouse and disposed of it tidily.

Well, she would dispose of the dragon, too. And she would get some ideas on how to go about it.

She went to speak to the royal cook. "How would you slay a dragon?" she asked.

"I would cut off his head with a carving knife," said the cook. "But of course you couldn't do that."

"Why not?" asked the princess.

"Young ladies don't slay dragons," the cook said.

"My father said that, too," said Penelope, and she went to speak to the royal tailor. "How would you slay a dragon?" she asked.

"I would stab him through the heart with a long needle," the tailor said.

"Would you lend me a long needle?" asked the princess.

"Young ladies don't slay dragons," the tailor said. "Besides, I don't have a needle long enough or strong enough."

So Princess Penelope went to the royal court jester. "How would you slay a dragon?" she asked.

"I would tell him such a funny story he would die laughing," said the jester.

"Do you have such a funny story?" asked Penelope.

"There aren't any stories *that* funny," said the jester. "Besides, young ladies don't slay dragons."

"You may be in for a surprise," said the princess, and she went to speak to the royal wizard. "How would you slay a dragon?" she asked.

The royal wizard thought a long time. Then he said, "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I want to slay the dragon," Penelope said matter-of-factly.

"Well, if you really want the truth," the wizard said, "the fact is, young ladies don't slay dragons."

"How do you know they don't?" Penelope asked.

"Everybody knows that," the wizard said. "Don't ask me how I know—it's just a fact."

"Well, then," the princess said, "if a brave young man wanted to save the palace from a smoke-blowing, flame-throwing, fierce, and wicked dragon, what advice would you give him?"

The royal wizard wrinkled his forehead, squinted his eyes, and made arches with his fingers while he thought. Then he said, "I would advise him to fight fire with fire."

"I see," said Penelope.

"My feet are cold," said the wizard. "Do me a favor and slide that hot bucket over here. I want to warm my toes on it."

Penelope did as he bade. "How does the bucket stay hot?" she asked.

"It's filled with a magic liquid that burns without fire," said the wizard. "I conjured it up myself."

"A good bit of magic," said Penelope admiringly. "Can you get the liquid to flame up?"

"If I want flames, I just drop a hot coal into the bucket," said the wizard. And then he fell asleep. He always fell asleep after talking three minutes, and now his three minutes were up. Besides, it was nap time for everybody in the palace.

But how anybody could sleep through the dragon's terrible roaring was a mystery to Penelope. And how anybody could sleep while evil threatened the palace was another mystery to her.

The wizard had given the princess an idea, though, and she tiptoed out of the room.

She found a pipe in her collection of iron and sealed it at one end. She tiptoed back to the wizard's room and filled the pipe with liquid from the magic bucket. With a pair of tongs, she took a hot coal from the fire and tiptoed away. She paused in the great hall long enough to don a suit of armor—minus the helmet that hurt her ears and hung low over her eyes. Finally she found a shield she could lift.

Then, clanking, she made her way through the courtyard to the gates. Though she was not strong enough to open them, she managed to push herself sideways through the iron bars. And she wasn't the least bit afraid.

Now, the dragon was the biggest, the most ferocious dragon that ever lived. Princess Penelope didn't know that, but she rather suspected it, for why else wouldn't the brave men in the kingdom come to slay him?

And the dragon, who was also the wisest dragon that ever lived, had a hunch someone was after him. So he crept slowly around the walls to see who it was—roaring terrible roars and belching the sky full of fire and smoke as he went.

"I wish he wouldn't smoke so much," Penelope muttered as she crept after him. Rounding the corner, she could just make out the monstrous tip of the dragon's tail disappearing around the corner ahead.

"This will never do," she said after the third corner. Turning, she crept the other way—and she met the dragon face to face!

Now, it isn't easy to describe the ferocious battle that ensued, but it went something like this.

"Stop or I'll shoot," said Penelope calmly.

"What's a nice girl like you doing out slaying dragons?" sneered the dragon as he crept toward her, blinking several times because of her dazzling beauty.

"I said, stop or I'll shoot."

"You don't *shoot* dragons," the dragon said, coming closer. "Everybody I ever heard of slays them with swords."

"I'm not like everybody you ever heard of," Penelope said.

"I wonder why that is," the dragon said. And though he didn't know it at the time, the dragon had spoken his last words.

Princess Penelope raised her lead pipe, ignited the liquid with her hot coal, and dealt the deadly dragon a deadly blow.



Now, nobody would believe the terrible fire that followed, so it isn't necessary to describe it. But it was like the end of the world.

At last the smoke cleared away. And there, standing among the charred remains of the world's most ferocious dragon, was—the world's most handsome prince. Penelope couldn't believe her eyes.

"I've been waiting for something like that to happen," said the prince, smiling a handsome smile and blinking a winsome blink. "You'll marry me, of course."

But—Penelope was the world's most beautiful princess. Having her for a wife was more than the prince had dared dream, especially while bouncing about in the body of a dragon.

"I have a kingdom ten times the size of this pea patch," he added, "and it's all yours if you'll say yes."

Penelope gazed into his eyes a long time. Thoughtfully, she said, "I've been waiting for someone like you to ask me something like that. But there's something you should know about me first. I wouldn't be happy just being a queen and doing queen-things. I like to fix drawbridges, build birdhouses, slay dragons—that sort of thing."

"It so happens I have bridges, birds, and dragons to spare," said the prince hopefully.

"Then my answer is yes," said Penelope.

And with that they saddled up a white horse and rode off into the sunset.

Now, even though this is the end of the story, you realize, of course, they are still living happily ever after.

