The Ferric King

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by Don Lott

IN DAYS of old, when knights were bold and the flower of knighthood had begun to wilt, there reigned in Southern Britain a noble and venerable king, called Ferric (better known as Ferric the Great). He was descended from a long line of Ferros—Ferum, his great-grandfather; Ferrous I, his grandfather; and Ferrous II, his father. For Ferric these were troubled times. The morals of his subjects were depressingly low. They refused to attend Mass, they watched pornographic morality plays, fixed tournaments, and threw jousts. Poor Ferric didn't know what to do. Even more alarming was the fact that the Pope had heard of the situation and had sent Ferric a message warning him that the spirituality of the people had better improve, or he would be placed on T. E. (temporary excommunication).

"Lack-a-day," he cried. "What shall I do." And then an idea occurred to him. (Some say 'twas divine inspiration.)

Soon, over all the kingdom, town criers sallied forth with a Royal Proclamation:

"Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye! Be it known to all subjects that King Ferric, better known as Ferric the Great, your wise and noble ruler, doth proclaim a contest to choose the most virtuous people in the realm. Judging will be done on the basis of the virtue which one exhibits best. Winners will then be known to all men by being titled after their particular virtue. Fabulous prizes. Anyone can enter.

And as the months passed by, Ferric's secret judges passed through the kingdom, seeking out those who demonstrated outstanding virtue. Slowly, but steadily, winners were chosen, titled, and rewarded. As the contest drew nearer and
nearer to a close, Ferric chuckled gleefully to himself. Things were working out just the way he had planned. Already the morals of his subjects had improved due to their interest in the contest, and soon he would have a select group of virtuous personages as advisors to help maintain the high moral level of his people.

Ferric made ready to receive the honored assemblage. Decorations were made, celebrations were planned. A new wing was being added to the King’s castle in which the newly founded Assembly of the Order of Virtue would convene. Orders were sent out that all winners were to proceed at once to the Castle for their first convention. From the four corners of the realm the most virtuous subjects of King Ferric (better known as Ferric the Great) embarked on their pilgrimages.

BOOK I
(In which Sir Truth encounters Falsehood the Dragon.)

The three weary travelers rode slowly through the forest. Sir Truth’s shining armor gleamed in the sunlight and he sat bolt upright in the saddle. Behind him rode Lady Chastity, truly one of nature’s wonders, with soft golden hair, and a beautiful face tantalizingly hidden by a sheer silk veil. Her hemline had begun to ride up on her leg, and she demurely pulled it back down below her ankle. Portly Sir Tolerance came last, his fleshy cheeks puffing from heat and fatigue. He was dressed all in black—black armor, black shield, black sword and buckler—except for the two parallel white lines across his chest-plate. Of the three, Sir Tolerance was suffering the most, from the trip, due to his apparel. Occasionally his horse would stumble on the narrow path, jolting the heavy armor up and down on his shoulders, bruising the bones and chafing the flesh. “Damnable steed,” he would mutter. Finally, he could travel no further. “Sir Truth,” he bellowed, “me thinks we need a rest. Lady Chastity looks as if she couldn’t ride another step. Pray let us stop awhile in consideration for the Lady.”

“Very well,” said Sir Truth. He dismounted and offered Lady Chastity his hand. The trio had barely comforted themselves beneath some shade trees when a terrific roar filled the air and shook the earth.
“Gadzooks!”, cried Sir Truth. “What was that?”
“Forsooth,” said Sir Tolerance, “if I didn’t know better I’d say that was a dragon’s roar.”
“You may be right,” squealed Lady Chastity. “Look!”
“By Jove,” said Sir Tolerance, “it is a dragon!”
And sure enough, it was—a huge, scaly monster with tremendous jaws and flaring nostrils, out of which belched smoke and flame.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?” demanded the dragon.

Sir Truth bent over and whispered in Tolerance’s ear. “I say, do you ever remember George mentioning talking dragons in those stories he told?” Sir Tolerance shook his head.

“Well,” roared the dragon, “I’m waiting.”

Sir Truth stepped forward. “Well, you see, dragon old boy, the Lady is known as Lady Chastity. This portly fellow here is Sir Tolerance, and I happen to be Sir Truth.” As he finished the introductions, he flourished his plume in the air, pressed it to his middle, and took a deep bow. At that precise moment a flame jetted out of the dragon’s left nostril, searing the seat of Truth’s armor plated trousers.

“Ye gods!” he yelped. “Why do you attack me, dragon?”

The dragon lifted his head loftily. “Because men know me as Falsehood. I hate the truth and I try to destroy it whenever I can. Fate has meant for us to meet, Sir Knight, to test and see which of us is greater—Truth or Falsehood.” Falsehood raised his scaly tail to the en garde position. Then, with the touch of the poet in him, he roared, “Lay on, Sir Truth, and damned be him who first cries, ‘Hold, forsooth!’”

And so began the greatest battle between man and beast that history has ever failed to record. Sir Truth, defending himself against Falsehood’s hot blasts with his gleaming shield, laid blow after blow upon the monster, to no avail. Neither adversary could gain an advantage. Sir Truth would thrust, and Falsehood would parry. For the rest of the morning they battled, the earth and sky filled with the sound of their conflict. Sir Truth began to weaken. His once shiny armor, which had reflected the heat from the dragon’s nostrils, was now tarnished from the smoke and flames. He de-
cided to try one last desperate attempt. Aiming his sword at the soft flesh of the monster's throat, he thrust forward with all his power,—and missed, the point of his weapon lodging in between two of the dragon's sixty year molars.

"Aha!" roared Falsehood. "I've got ya now."

"Oh, no!" wailed Sir Truth. "You wouldn't slay a knight with a wife and four children, would you?"

Falsehood puffed out his chest haughtily. "Of course not. No self-respecting dragon would do that! I guess you've learned your lesson." He released Sir Truth from his grip, and the bedraggled knight fell in a metallic heap on the ground. Triumphantly, Falsehood wheeled on his back claws and marched away.

Sir Tolerance and Lady Chastity, who had been watching the horrible conflict, rushed to aid their fallen companion. They checked him over for serious injury, and found none.

"Well," said Lady Chastity, "the only thing he's suffering from right now is a severe case of prickly heat. He'll be all right."

Seeing that his friend was no longer in danger, Sir Tolerance's feeling of concern changed to rebuke. "Sir Truth, I'm ashamed of you. You lied to that dragon. Not only don't you have four children, but you aren't even married."

Sir Truth chafed at his companion's accusation. "I did not lie. I said 'a knight.' I did not necessarily refer to myself. If the dragon thought that, then that's his mistake, not mine. Besides, the ends justify the means. After all, Truth must prevail."

**BOOK II**

(In which Sir Tolerance encounters the Kriss Kross Knight)

While Sir Truth was recovering from the prickly heat which still inflamed his body, Sir Tolerance embarked on an exploratory search for water to soothe his ailing friend's condition. It was getting to be late afternoon when he finally broke through the heavy under-growth into a clearing, in the center of which was a snow-white pavilion. To the south he could see where the forest thinned out and became a gentle sloping plain checkered with square enclosures. Sir Tolerance wondered if anyone were around. He cupped his
hands to his mouth and bellowed, "What ho! Is anyone here?"

A bearded face jammed its way through the flaps of the pavilion. "Who dares give me 'What ho' at this hour of the morning?"

Sir Tolerance was somewhat taken aback by the rude greeting. "I do, fair knight," he answered, "and it happens to be late afternoon, not morning."

"It's whatever time the Kriss Kross Knight says it is," roared the bearded face. He stepped out of the tent. Huge he was, all of six feet in height, with sinewy arms and legs. His armor and weapons were of purest white, and on his shield he bore his coat of arms—a monogrammed flaming cross.

Sir Tolerance walked to within a few feet of him. "And you, surly fellow, I would guess are he."

"That I am. And who, portly fellow, might you be?"

Sir Tolerance fought to control his chagrin. "I," he announced pontifically, "am Sir Tolerance." Remembering Sir Truth's mishap, he didn't bow. "What land is this, and what are those enclosures on yon plain?"

"That plain is my kingdom, and those enclosures contain my subjects."

"But why enclosures?"

"To separate the different races and religions, what else?"

"Forsooth," quoth Sir Tolerance, "thou art a dastardly fellow, enclosing your subjects behind high walls. You are what I am bound by oath to fight and destroy, Methinks I shall have to challenge you to a duel!"

Sir Tolerance drew his ebony handled sword, and the Kriss Kross Knight did likewise. Soon, the blows were falling like hailstones—thrust, parry; parry thrust. Sir Tolerance drew first blood. The Kriss Kross Knight returned with a stroke that scraped Sir Tolerance's breast plate down to the metal, leaving a white diagonal gash across the two parallel lines. On and on they fought, for over an hour. Finally both combatants sat in exhaustion, facing each other.

"Truly," said the Kriss Kross Knight, "I have never met a man more my equal."

"Nor I," said Sir Tolerance. "This battle may take days to end."
"Yes, and it's keeping me from my other duties."
"And I from mine," quoth Sir Tolerance. "I'm on a long journey with some companions."
"Well," said the Kriss Kross Knight, "what say you that we call this duel a draw, and go our separate ways?"
"Oh, I'm afraid I couldn't do that," said Tolerance. "Not that I wouldn't like to, you understand, but it's the principle of the thing. I must see that those walls are torn down."
"I'll tell you what," said Kriss Kross, leaning on his sword. "Why don't we make some kind of arrangement that is both agreeable to you and me?"
"Splendid," quoth Tolerance. He thought a few moments.
"I have it! We'll tear down the enclosures—"
"Now wait a minute," Kriss Kross objected.
"No, just let me finish. As I was saying, we'll tear down the enclosures, at the same time telling the residents in each how wonderful their area is compared to the others. In that way no one will want to cross over. Of course we'll have to make sure the areas are approximately the same size—sort of a separate, but equal arrangement."
"Very good, Sir Tolerance. I like it. And we could put some kind of colored line that's easily seen around each area so that no one will cross over by accident."
"That's the idea, Sir Kriss Kross. The beauty of it lies in the fact that the people in one area will be able to see what the people in other areas are doing, so if they lag behind in the development of their resources they'll have more incentive to work harder and catch up."
"Oh, splendid, Sir Tolerance, simply splendid." The Kriss Kross Knight whacked him solidly on the back. "You're a man after my own heart."
"'Tis nothing," said Tolerance modestly. "My duty as I saw it. By the way, the reason I wandered out here in the first place was to get some water. Perhaps you can give me some?"
"Harumph, well, ah, I'd really like to, Sir Tolerance, but you see you're wearing black armor and I'm bound by my knightly oath to give aid and comfort only to White Knights. I hope you understand, custom and all."
"Well, if you've given your knightly oath—of course I understand."
“Good, good. You know, Sir Tolerance, beneath all of that black armor you’re a White Knight at heart.”

BOOK III
(In which Lady Chastity encounters the Wizard of Seduction, better known as Lady Chastity’s Lover)

While Sir Tolerance was engaged in his search for water, Lady Chastity remained with Sir Truth, soothing his fevered brow. Never had she seen anyone suffer so from prickly heat. After a while, the inflammation seemed to subside a bit, and Truth fell into a deep slumber. Lady Chastity, tired from her nursing, decided to take a relaxing walk. By accident, she found an almost hidden path and, as a whim, decided to follow it and see where it led. She walked on, not keeping track of the time, for the way was shady, the breeze was cool, and the most delicious odors filled the air. Suddenly, she found herself in a beautiful garden, where the rarest flowers in all Christendom seemed to bloom bountifully. The good Lady was quite ecstatic. She walked among the rows, finger­ing each petal, sniffing each intoxicating aroma.

“Oh, this is just simply marvelous,” she squealed. “I’ve never seen a place so lovely.”

“M’Lady, may I help you?” The soft masculine voice startled her. She turned and found herself facing the handsomest man she had ever seen. He had soft, curly brown hair, laughing eyes, and a ruddy complexion—a graceful man, narrow at the waist and broad at the shoulders.

“He’s a noble looking creature,” she thought, “but he’s dressed like a servant.” Blushing, and with a voice still quite choked with astonishment she asked, “Are—you the groundskeeper here?”

He laughed. “You might say that. Would you like me to show you around?”

“Oh, yes! That would be delightful.” They walked around the garden, and he showed her all of the varying species of flowers, explaining each one’s particular points of interest. He plucked a yellow flower from a bush and tied it in her hair. She giggled, and tied a red blossom in his hair. He chuckled. “Would you like to step up to my cottage and see my collection of floral etchings?”
"Oh, yes! I think that would be delightful."

An hour later they lay in bed together, cuddled in each other's arms. "What was that drink you gave me?" she asked. "If it was an aphrodisiac, this whole affair means nothing."

"It was my own concoction, M'lady, made out of sweet smells, soft music, and watered down with a thousand 'I love you's.'"

She smiled contentedly. "I don't even know your name."

"I'm known as the Wizard of Seduction. My friends just call me Whizz."

"You certainly are."

"What's your name?"

"Lady Chastity."

"I mean before you became Lady Chastity."

"It was 'Hester'."

EPILOGUE

As luck would have it, our three traveler's continued on to their destination without another mishap, and were received graciously by King Ferric (better known as Ferric the Great) and his court. Things were not as happy for them, however, as they might have been. Sir Truth, try as he might, simply could not scour the smoke and fire marks from his armour. And every once in a while, especially when he sat before an open fire, he'd get prickly heat so bad he'd have to stay in bed for a week.

Sir Tolerance had problems, too. None of King Ferric's armorers, wonderful though they were, could hide the glaring white gash across Tolerance's breast-plate.

As for Lady Chastity, well she showed no outwardly visible signs of change, except that no longer did she demurely pull her hemline below her ankles when it happened to ride up.

Oh, yes, one more thing. They all lived rationally ever after.