

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

A tale of wisdom and courage

by Dr. Win Wenger

Little Eddie Wills was only ten years old when he firmly decided that he was going to grow up to be a great knight and hero.

All the other kids laughed at him. "'Eddie Wills!' they jeered. That's not the name of a warrior. To be a great knight you have to be named George, or Thor, or Basil, or Florian, or Whorf. But Eddie! - ha! ha ha!"

And several of the bigger kids beat him up. That was when Eddie really firmly decided he was going to learn how to fight and to be a great knight.

Eddie worked hard and practiced and learned, trying to become a knight. All that training was hard work, and sometimes he had to stop and do other things. Sometimes something beautiful would catch his eye — an old building leaning as if it were tired; a flower with morning dew glinting in the sun, a graceful tree or a fiery proud horse; and he might stop long enough to try to draw it or paint it. Usually his pictures didn't look very much like what he intended, and sometimes they did.

Most of the time, though, he worked hard at learning to become a knight. And because Eddie was bright and alert, and worked hard, and practiced and exercised hard, and picked up every trick he could find, by the time he became a man everyone saw that Ed Wills had grown up to become a great warrior indeed!

But inside, Ed Wills still felt like a little boy, and sometimes he was afraid, though he tried not to let anyone know when he was frightened.

He felt better about it when several of the older knights confided to him that, yes, in difficult situations sometimes they, too, were frightened though they tried not to let on about it.

The year before had been difficult for everyone. That was the year that everyone's crops failed, with the floods and too much rain. And this year everyone's crops withered and died under the summer sun without any rain. Now there was very little food to be found, though some people said some other people still had lots of food hidden away.

Now people were really starting to go hungry, and some said the only thing that would save them was the Philosopher's Stone.

"— But the Philosopher's Stone," said the village Elder in a weak quavery voice that kind of sounded like his watery eyes looked, "can be reached along one path only," and he gave Ed a map. "... And this path is guarded by 50 fierce dragons."

Ed would have to fight his way through the 50 fierce dragons, and he was afraid for good reason. But there was no one else who could go, so he went...

The way was long and hard and tiring and hot. No one had been this way for many years, and the path was broken and hard to follow. Finally, on the morning of the eighth day of his quest, crawling over some rocks which had fallen into the path, Ed looked into the sunrise and there was his first dragon coming at him!

"Wait," cried Ed, "I don't even know your name!"

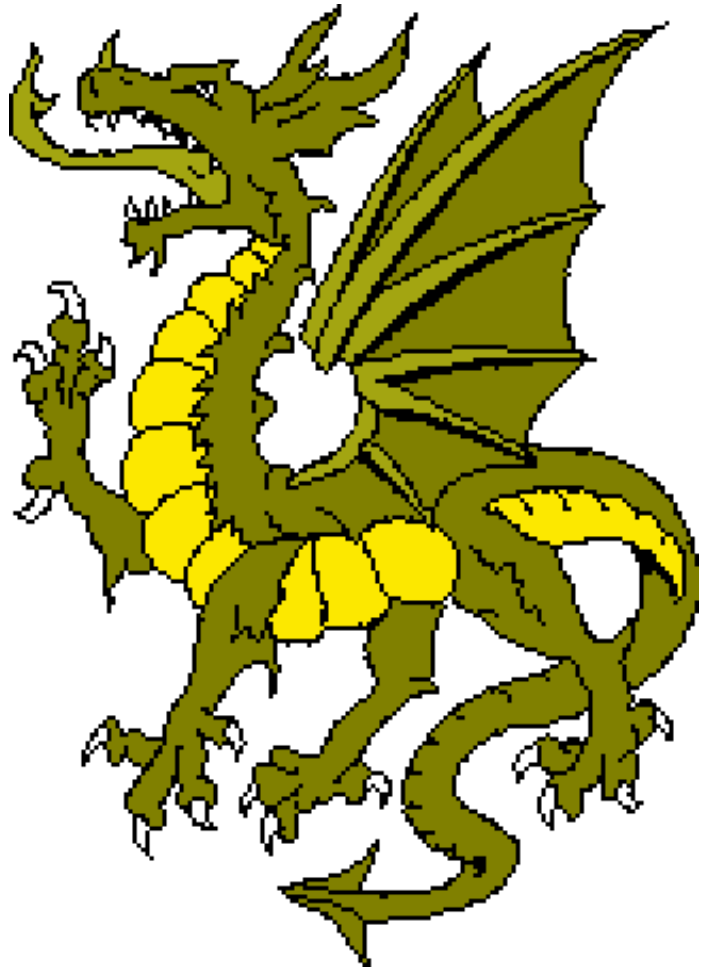
"Asaph," harrumphed the dragon, spreading his wings and flurrying up a terrible cloud of dust. "Who be you, fool human?"

"Ed Wills," said Ed, "And pleased to meet you, Asaph. But my village is starving and I must bring my people the Philosopher's Stone."

"Your name is 'Dead,' fool human, unless you turn and run back the way you came, this very instant, and maybe even then!"

"I have to go get the Philosopher's Stone for my people. I don't want to hurt you. — Why do we have to fight?"

"Because it is The Way," roared Asaph, and he leaped to attack.



It was a terrible fight. The very first instant of the attack, the dragon's claw made a long searing scratch all the way down Ed's arm. Ed got his shield up in time to fend off worse damage. There was no more time for feeling afraid, and he pressed his own attack forward with his flashing sword.

The fight was long and hot and sore. The great sword grew very heavy in Ed's hand, but he fought on. At last he found a weak spot in the dragon's side and drove in the final blow.

Ed could not help but notice, there was such a terribly sad look in Asaph's eye just before life faded out of it forever.

The road was hot and hard to walk on under the afternoon sun, and it was a long way before Ed could reach his next dragon. It was evening, and then night and a brief rest and then, all too soon, it was morning, and Ed was looking into another sunrise facing the second dragon!

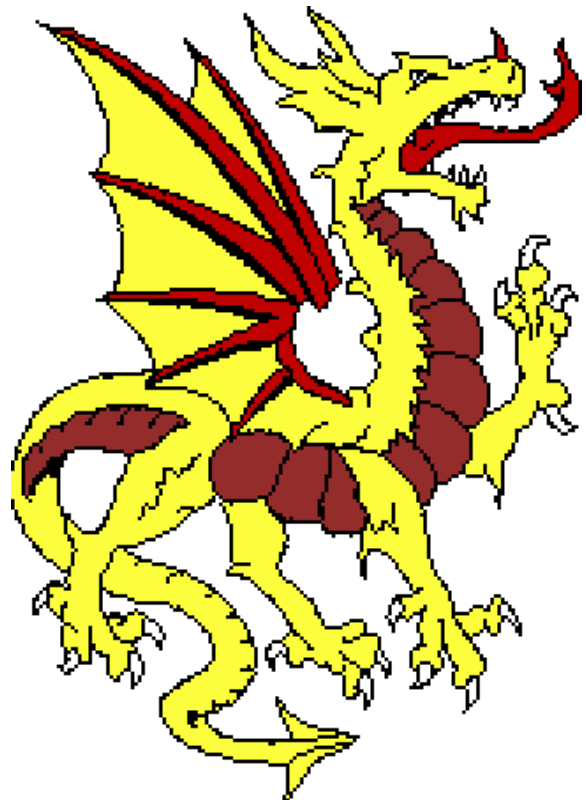
This dragon was even larger than the first one, all gold in the morning sunrise with red glints where the scales of his back gleamed against the sun. His wings spread tremendously as he strode forward to attack Ed.

"Wait," cried Ed, "I don't even know your name!"

"Brin," roared the dragon, huffing his chest and raising both wings in a great double-arch, ready to leap.

"I don't want to hurt you, any more than I wanted to hurt Asaph. Why must we fight?" asked Ed.

"Ha! — everyone knows that," snorted Brin. "It is The Way!" and leaped forward to try to land on Ed. Ed ducked aside and Brin crashed down where Ed had been standing. Ed's sword cut deeply into Brin's wing and the fight was on.



This battle went on even longer under the hot sun, sweat running into Ed's eyes. His sword arm became so weary he felt like it was on fire. The dust swirled up from Brin's lunges and at times Ed felt like he was choking, but he knew his people back home would die if he didn't bring back the Stone and that he had to win. Finally, late in the afternoon, he did win.

What a sad crumpled heap Brin was now, more like a pile of old rags than anything that had once been the living flame of a great dragon. Brin no longer was furious and great and terrifying, he was just a heap of old garbage. Even as Ed looked on, trying to catch his breath after the fight, the last iridescence of the scales, highlighted by the setting sun, crumpled, withered and disappeared into grayish blackness.

All too soon it was dawn again, and already Ed was in view of the third great dragon.

This dragon was almost as large as Brin had been, and was gleaming so brightly in the morning sun that Ed had to squint to look at him.

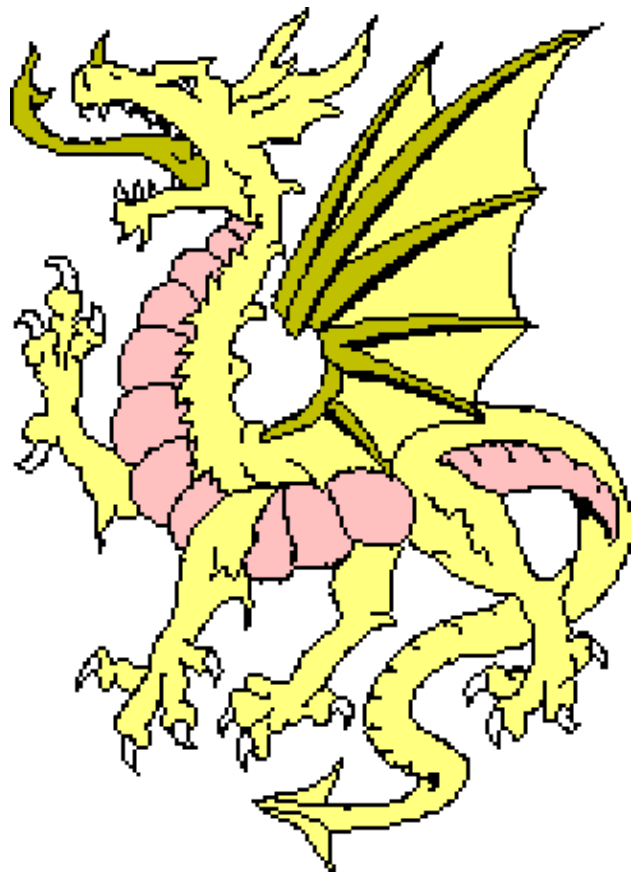
"I don't even know your name, mighty dragon," said Ed as the gleaming dragon came toward him.

"Corion," growled the dragon. "Not that it matters if you know who it is that kills you. Give up now and I'll be merciful and make it quick."

"Why must we fight?" angrily replied Ed. "I don't want to hurt you any more than I wanted to hurt poor Asaph and Brin."

"Everyone knows why we must fight," said the dragon as he spread his gleaming golden wings for the attack. "It is The Way."

"Then I shall make a better Way," said Ed to himself and said to the dragon, "Well, before we fight, could you stand there in the sunrise a minute?"



Surprised, Corion paused where he was. "Why should I do that?"

"Your brother Brin was so beautiful in the sunrise yesterday, I truly hated to kill him. And you're beautiful, too — that fierce beak, the sharp fierce angle of your brow, the sun glinting off your arched wings — you are a sight I never want to forget!"

"Well," said Corion, arching his neck. "Do you really think so?"

"It's just extraordinary, the sheen where the sun rides over the shining scales of your great back," Ed said, "It makes waves of color as you breathe, and it is very bright."

"Well, I had no idea you felt that way," said the dragon, spreading his wings even further and swelling his chest. "Tell me more."

"I don't have enough words to tell what I see when I look at you," sighed Ed, "but truly I have never seen a dragon so golden as you."

"It is a nice color, I agree," said Corion. "In fact, if you step around here to see it from the side where the sun is, it's even brighter."

"Oh my, yes," said Ed as he scrambled around.

"You know," said Corion, " —long as you're over there anyway, why don't I just let you go on. You seem like a nice enough fellow, even if you are a human, and I'm sure Daylith will be able to keep you from the Stone."

"Why, thank you!" said Ed. "As a dragon you're certainly very nice yourself, as nice as they come. The sight of you in the sun is a memory I will treasure forever." And Ed happily went on down the road.

It wasn't long before he came to the next dragon, a great bronze dragon bigger than any he had seen thus far.

The great bronze dragon came charging at him.

"Stop, Daylith!" shouted Ed. "I must talk with you!"

In surprise, Daylith skidded his heels in the dirt to stop, and his wings beat thunder until he recovered his balance. "You know my name," he said, startled.

"And your appearance certainly lives up to that name, bright as day itself with the sun shining against your wings and back!"

"You don't say," said Daylith, who now seemed amused.

"How do you get your scales so bright? Do you polish them?"

"I think you are only saying such things to try to get around me," said Daylith.

"Think what you like," said Ed, "but please do me a favor."

"If you think you're going to get around me with all that smooth talk—"

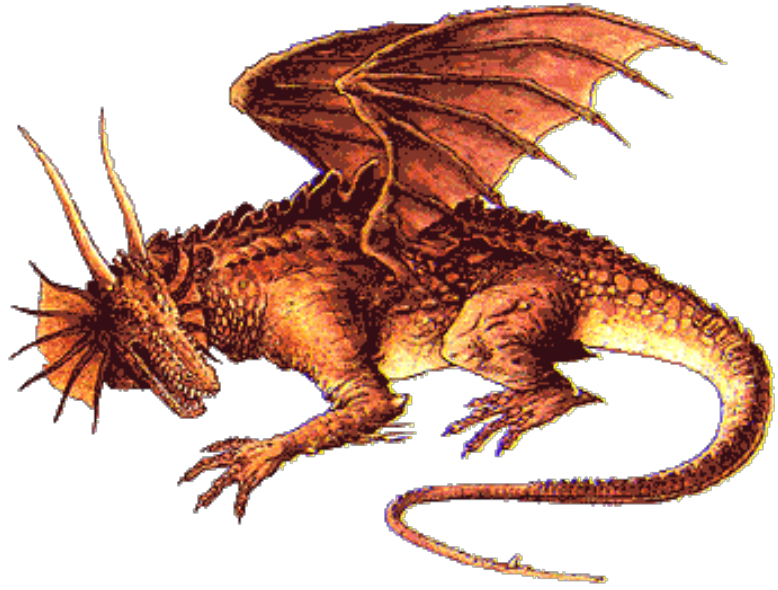
"Oh, no, nothing like that," said Ed, "but if you'll move just a little up that hillside there and face that way, with the sun just right behind you, I'd like to try to paint your picture. It should only be just a few minutes."

"Just a few minutes, eh — oh, all right, let's see what you can do with making my portrait." Daylith moved a little up the hillside and turned just so. Ed hauled his brushes and paints out of his pack, the ones he had brought along to improve the map he was following, in case he ever got back to his village.

"I haven't done this in quite awhile," said Ed. "But how often does one get such an extraordinary subject to paint?" and he bent to his task, trying to sketch and then paint a picture of the great bronze dragon.

"There," Ed said at last, turning the picture around for Daylith to see. "It's not so good a representation as I'd like it to be. You really look taller than that, and I haven't been able to really capture that wonderful shimmer on your wings — I hope you don't mind —"

"That's okay," said Daylith. "May I keep this painting?"



"Of course, it's yours," said Ed, "That's whom I painted it for. Just let me look at it this one last time, and then let me look at you one last time."

"You're not so bad, for a human," said Daylith. "I just don't feel very much like smashing you into little bits right now — I think I'll go set this painting up in my cave and let my cousin, Eiroth, finish the job of keeping you from the Stone."

"Why, thank you!" said Ed to the great bronze dragon, and went on down the road. The day had turned cooler and the air smelled sweet, and for the first time since Asaph, Ed began to think that he had a chance of reaching the Philosopher's Stone.



As he went along the road that afternoon, he heard thunder overhead and there, with wings widespread, was the great green dragon Eiroth.

"Hey," Eiroth yelled down, "You the guy who paints portraits?"

"Well," said Ed, "I'm not very good at it, but you dragons are such a sight to behold that it's something I feel I've got to try. I've never seen a great green like you before."

"Well," said Eiroth, sitting down in front of him and preening, "Let's get started, it's only a few hours before sunset. Let's see what you can do while the light holds."

"Okay," said Ed and took his paints and brushes out of his pack.

This time Ed painted a really good picture. Maybe practice was helping, but he was able to make the points of Eiroth's scales in the picture gleam like metal spearpoints, over the deep glistening sheen of the green. What pleased Eiroth most, though, was the fierce strong pose Ed gave him in the picture.

Eiroth happily carried the picture away. "I know that my brother Fyndazzle takes his work seriously and I'm sure he doesn't care about portraits. I'll let him do the job of keeping you from the Stone!"

Ed went on down the road as the day turned into evening.

R-R-R-R-ROARRRRR!! The road, the land, everything shook with the great noise of a tremendous white dragon that came flying out of the sunset toward Ed. "You, stop right there! Prepare to die!"

"Fyndazzle!" cried Ed. The dragon continued toward him. "I've never seen a white dragon before."

"So what," said Fyndazzle. "Prepare to die!"

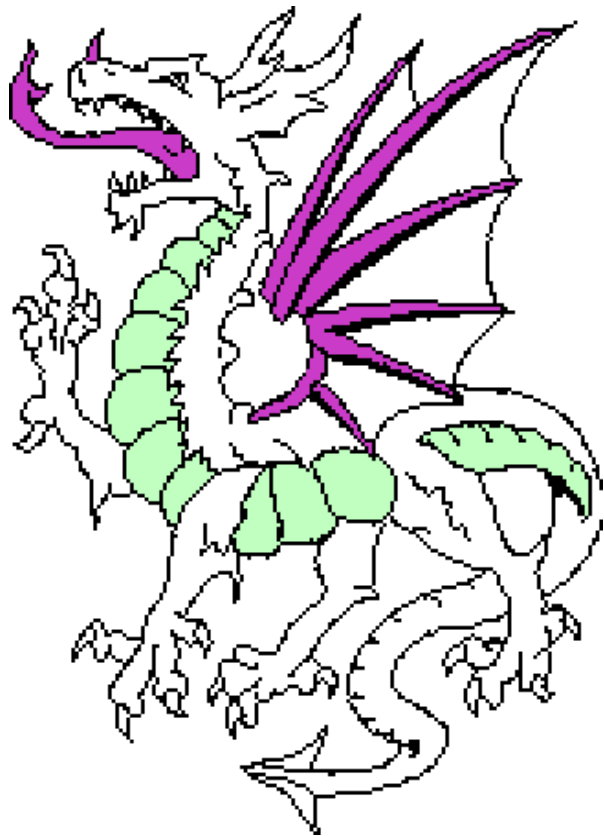
"I don't want to hurt you," said Ed, "You are really such a gorgeous sight with the sunset behind you."

Fyndazzle landed just in front of Ed, who could feel his hot breath. "You're just saying that, and my brothers were fools to let you past them for painting their silly portraits! Prepare to die!" Fyndazzle reared to strike.

"Oh, no," said Ed. "I could never paint *your* portrait."

"Why not," snarled Fyndazzle, surprised.

"You are just too gorgeous, and there's no paint I have which could match your glory in a mere picture."



"What could you do, then," said Fyndazzle, who seemed disappointed. Fyndazzle didn't want a picture, but was disappointed that he couldn't have one if he had wanted it.

"Nothing I can say is match for your grace and power and beauty," said Ed, "but let me try to put a little of what I feel about it into words..."

*"The far wind roaring
cannot raise a glory
greater than the towering
sunset cloud. Soaring
over the wind's flurry,
The great white dragon!
His name bespeaks him:
Fyndazzle!"*

"My goodness," said Fyndazzle. "Do you really think so?"

Ed nodded and said, "Do you know what I wish?"

"No, what?"

"I've never known what it is to fly," said Ed. "Am I too big for you to carry up into the sky on your back?"

The beat of the great wings was a mighty thunder in his ears. The wind and setting sun rushed in his gladdened face. Far below, the sunset had turned the land into burning gold.

They flew all the way, past the stations of the other 44 dragons, to the mesa on top of which was the Philosopher's Stone.

As they circled in to land in front of the Stone, Fyndazzle looked back over his shoulder at Ed, to say, "You already know much of the Stone, in your heart, or you wouldn't be here. Learn the rest of the Stone, take what you learn back to your land, and your people will live."

Engraved on the Stone were these words:

Do no harm, or the least harm possible to prevent or reduce harm.

— and —

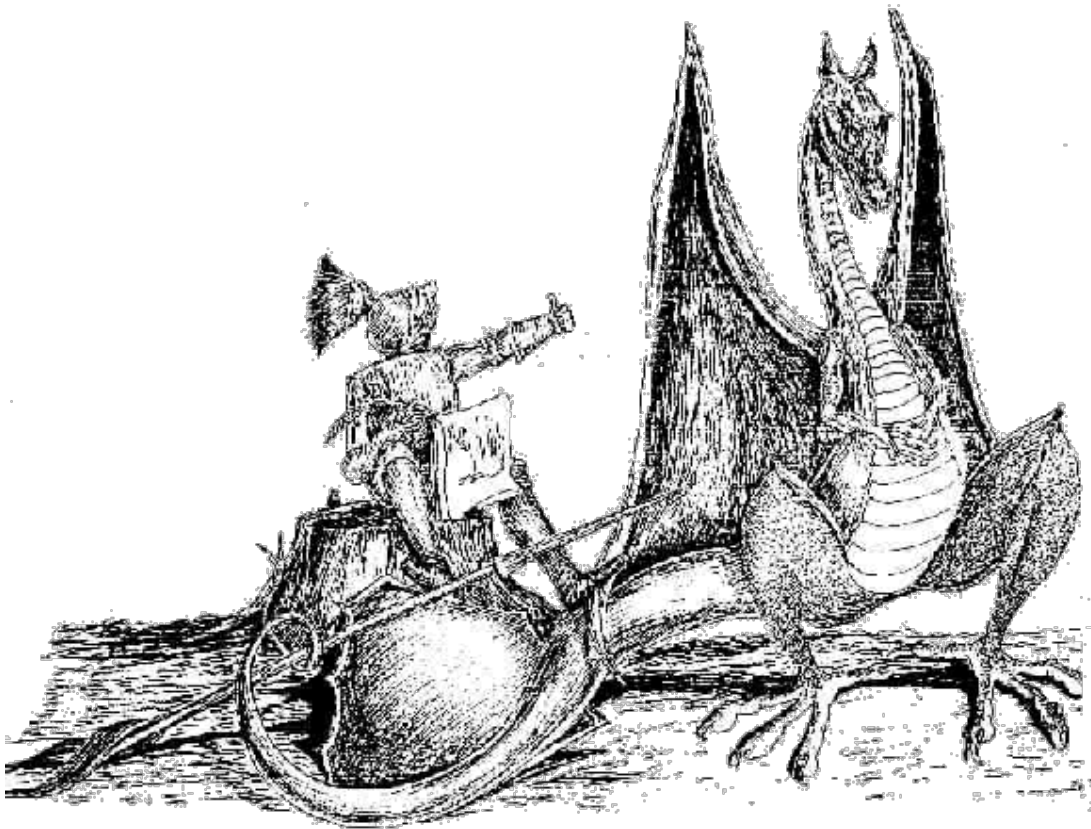
Delight in beauty.

Delight in things making sense.

Delight in helping others toward delight.

"After you've learned the Philosopher's Stone by heart," said Fyndazzle, "maybe I'll let you paint my picture after all, here by the Stone. In return, if you do that, I'll carry you all the way back to your land." And the dragon went over to pose by the Stone.

And so Ed did, and so Fyndazzle did, a grand sight landing in the village in full sight of all Ed's friends and neighbors. With the word of the Stone, the people were able to find enough food around to get by until the new crops came in, which were a rich harvest, and everyone lived well enough and long lives, long enough to pass on to you this tale.



The End