

Sir George and Count Drake

A Chess Quest Short Story

Michael D. Young

Rough hands shook George awake.

"I'm sorry, sir," came a young man's voice. "But he's asking for you again. He's making quite a ruckus."

George shot up in bed. His squire did not need to name the visitor.

He stood hurriedly, fastening on his armor as he spoke. "Has he hurt anyone?"

"I don't think so, sir," Miles, his squire, said. "But that's liable to change if he keeps knocking around like that."

George fastened his helmet, closed his eyes, and offered a silent but fervent prayer. Then he reached into the nightstand and withdrew the most important part of his ensemble: a white ivory pawn housed in a tiny bronze cage.

It was his most precious possession—and the token that marked him as a champion of the light. He fastened the cage to the chain around his neck and tucked it beneath his armor.

"And what say you, my noble squire? Is it a day to go on the defensive or the—well—offensive?"

George heard a distant scream, a scuffle from outside.

"Oh, that sounds like offensive to me, sir—if you don't mind me saying so."

George shook his head. "Not at all, not at all. Just deciding what to bring."

Two metal spheres rested on his nightstand. He took one in each hand. The three quests he had completed had awakened three gifts in his pawn; one allowed him to reshape the spheres into whatever implements he needed. Each quest granted a new gift, and each gift gave him a possible advantage in the inevitable battle against his Nemesis. If he tried facing him before he had obtained all four gifts, he would be underprepared indeed.

And that could be deadly.

He imagined a tall white shield emblazoned with a crimson cross, and the sphere in his left hand flowed into shape. In his right, he formed a sharp dagger. He could lengthen it into a more threatening blade if circumstances demanded, but he thought it best not to antagonize his opponent too much.

"I'm ready. Miles, stay close and bring the other spheres. If I lose one, get another into my hand as quickly as possible. Do you understand?"

Miles nodded quickly. "Of course, sir. I'll be right at your side, sir."

George smiled at the lad, whom he had known since shortly after his birth. "You can stay back a bit. I don't want you getting yourself hurt. Just be ready to come when I call."

Together they rushed down the boardinghouse stairs and into the town square. Shouts rang out. Metal clanged. Above it all rasped the familiar voice of George's nemesis—Count Percy von Drake.

The count wore black armor chased with red inlays like swirling flames. His helmet had been fashioned into a dragon's gaping mouth, though its visor was closed. Spear in hand, he was terrorizing a flock of chickens, which scattered before him in a storm of feathers and squawks.

George planted himself in the town square, his shield raised.

"Count Drake," he called. "There are easier ways to get a good hot meal. Why don't you come into the inn and let's talk this over? We can even order chicken, if you like."

"Confound the chickens, George. You know what I want. I have an appetite for battle. Come, let's have it out. I am your nemesis, am I not?"

George nodded slowly, careful not to give Count Drake any excuse to lash out.

"Indeed, you are, and I'm sure the whole kingdom knows it by now. But you know as well as I that I must follow the rules. I'm not ready yet."

Count Drake rolled his eyes. "Oh yes, your ridiculous little quests. I completed all four of mine in an afternoon. Who knew it would be so easy to bribe so many high-ranking officials, not to mention a little industrial sabotage. Child's play. What's the holdup with you?"

George shrugged, offering his nemesis a genuine smile. "Well, look you, wicked deeds are much easier to perform than noble ones. I have completed only three of my four quests, and I will not fight you until the last is properly accomplished. You do understand that, don't you?"

Count Drake paced back and forth, idly swinging the spear as he walked.

"You don't have to finish all four quests before you fight me. Face me now and complete the fourth later; the rules say nothing about the order. What—are you afraid? Do you not trust your training or the gifts you've already earned? For a man so renowned in combat, I find that hard to believe."

George looked away and drew a long breath. It was not fear of combat. He had trained with the sword since boyhood, and in a fair fight, he believed he could best the count. What held him back was the weight of memory: long summers filled with adventures, long nights trading tales beside the fire.

He sighed. "How long have we known each other, Percy?"

The count stopped pacing. "Hmm. I don't know. As I think back, I can't clearly recall a time when I didn't know you, George. Yes, what does that have to do with anything?"

George shrugged. "Oh, didn't all that time together mean anything? All those long summer days learning training our steeds? We must have covered half the kingdom. I don't want to fight you. It's as simple as that. I've been dragging my feet trying to complete these quests because I don't want it to come to this. If I could have chosen my nemesis, I quite literally would have chosen just about anyone but you."

The count turned, pointing at George with his spear. "Ah, but it wasn't your choice, was it? Nor was it mine. You accepted your pawn, and I accepted mine. Too bad they are not the same color. You cannot ignore what we have become regardless of our youthful history. Those long summer journeys you speak of were hardly full of creature comforts."

He drew in a long breath and let it out slowly, his gaze fixed on George. "You are a paladin; I am a nemesis. The struggle is older than either of us, and we are merely its newest players—its newest combatants. My glory and my honor in the organization are at stake. I cannot lose to you."

George raised his shield, wary of any sudden move. His friend had changed so much. It hurt to hear the hard edge in Percy's voice. What evil acts had the dark quests already required of him? What else would he do if George failed to stop him? The boy George had grown up with seemed gone, replaced by a haughty count who merely wore his face.

"It's late, Count," George said. "Why don't you go home? I'll complete my final quest tomorrow, and I'll send word of where we can meet for our duel. Can you wait one more night to satisfy this perverse hunger of yours?"

The count stared back at him, his eyes steely, but at last nodded. "I suppose I can. Be warned, George. I will have my duel, one way or another. If you don't make good on your word, I'll have to cause a little chaos until you do."

The count lowered his spear, turned on his heel, and trudged off into the darkness, plates of armor clanking. Only when George could no longer hear the clanking armor did he lower his shield.

"You can come out now," he called back to his squire. "He's gone."

The boy ran up to him. "I heard the whole thing. Are you really going to fight him tomorrow? Like, really?"

George grunted under his breath. "It appears I have little choice. He won't be satisfied with terrorizing chickens forever, and if I refuse him, innocent people will be hurt."

He shook his head, staring into the darkness where his old friend had vanished. "Oh, why did it have to be him? There are all sorts of brigands and knaves the dark could have chosen, whose hearts were already so stained black. Why did it have to be him?"

The squire scuffed one boot against the ground. "Maybe those brigands are already on their side, so to speak. The dark would rather turn a good person bad. That would be a greater victory."

George glanced down at the squire, then placed a hand on his shoulder. "You are wise for one so young. Come, we have a big day tomorrow, and I'd like to have some decent sleep."

George started off. The lad scurried behind him.

"Sir...which quest do you still have to complete?"

George stopped and closed his eyes. "The Quest of Courage. And no, I have no idea how to complete it."

George stood with his squire at the outskirts of town, considering the several roads that led out into the countryside. The left road led into a dense, feral forest inhabited by all manner of mysterious creatures. Going right would take them into the mountains, where the squire had heard tales of disagreeable trolls who had made their caves there.

Taking the road straight ahead would lead toward the capital—the palace, a majestic walled city. Usually, Miles's master knew exactly which way to go, though he rarely explained his reasoning. After watching George turn from road to road for several minutes, Miles said, "Perhaps I could help you decide, if you need another opinion, that is."

To the squire's amazement, the knight nodded. "Perhaps. I've got to undergo a test of courage to earn my last ability as a pawn. Then I'll have the best chance of taking on my nemesis without losing my head."

He looked down the left path. "Seems plenty scary down there in the forest. We could just walk in, have a look around. I think that's plenty courageous all by itself."

George only grunted and shook his head. "I know practically every bush and shrub of that place. There are some odd creatures who prowl about, but certainly nothing I couldn't handle. I don't think it would count."

The squire turned toward the right path. "Well, what about the mountains, sir? Everyone's afraid of a big, beastly troll, right?"

Miles nodded to himself. If the decision were his, he would have made it in seconds. Either the forest or the mountains promised untold dangers, horrors, even, but apparently not to the gallant knight.

"Isn't there anything you're afraid of, sir?" he asked a bit timidly. "I mean, everyone's got to be afraid of something, right?"

George broke his gaze away from the crossroads and looked down at the boy. The knight's intense blue eyes bore into his, and a shiver ran through him. He was glad George was on his side.

"Yes, lad. No one who walks the earth can entirely escape fear—not even me. When I was young, I feared the sorts of things other boys did. My brothers would sneak lizards into church and torment me with them when we were supposed to be quiet. After a while, the sight of anything with scales made me shudder."

He sighed. "Now I fear less tangible things: failing to live up to my ideals, seeing those I love hurt, proving a coward when courage is required." He gestured toward the crossroads. "Such trials are not easily manufactured. Even so, I gave my word that I would complete the final quest today so our confrontation could take place."

He took one last long look at the road toward the forest.

"Why don't you return to the village, lad? I think this is a quest I must attempt alone. If I am outnumbered, perhaps that will count for something."

With a nod, Sir George trudged off down the road toward the darkened forest.

"But, sir," he called after him, "what should I do?"

George turned and called over his shoulder, "Whatever you like, lad. We're in for some excitement. Polish the armor, if you like. Perhaps go say a prayer for me."

And with that, he turned and was soon out of earshot. The squire watched him go, his own pit of fear gnawing at his stomach. He didn't like leaving Sir George's side. It just didn't seem right.

He made himself turn and head back toward the village, trying to puzzle out what he might actually do to help George. His wandering steps carried him toward the little stone church at the village's edge.

Inside, rows of wooden benches faced a stone altar beneath an ornate crucifix. Sunlight streamed through stained-glass windows, spilling pools of color across the floor. Miles entered as quietly as he could and slipped into a pew near the back.

He figured he would go unnoticed. He was about to bow his head and recite one of the few prayers his parents had taught him when he noticed someone sitting beside him. He looked over and nearly cried out—church or no church.

It was Count Drake, still wearing the same darkened armor, but strangely, also a smile.

“Don’t worry, lad,” he said suddenly. “I’m not here to harm you.”

The squire scooted a few handsbreadths farther down the bench.

“Then what are you here for? I didn’t think you were very religious,” he said.

Drake chuckled. “I used to be. George and I grew up together, remember? I did not come as often as George, but I still know how to go through the motions—and how to unsettle children.”

Drake’s gaze settled on him. “You and I both know that George is afraid of very little. He will spend the day searching for courage and find no proper test of it. There must be at least a taste of fear to overcome, don’t you think?”

The squire nodded slowly. “Yes, I suppose so, sir. But why are you coming to me? Shouldn’t you be talking to George about this?”

“Ah, I have spoken to George many times, but he will hear none of it. I am sure he confides in you, my boy. Has he told you what he fears? I want him at full strength when we duel. There is no honor in besting a weakened opponent. A victory over an untested paladin would mean little to me or to my order.”

The squire bit his lip. George had indeed told him about something that used to scare him as a child. But was that his to say? Or had George told him that in confidence?

He looked over at Drake, whose eyes had gone forward. He stared up at the crucifix.

Then again, perhaps what he was saying was true. George did need to come into his own, and he wasn’t going to find anything that scared him in the woods. By telling Count Drake, he might actually be helping George.

“He doesn’t like things with scales,” Miles said. “His brothers used to drop lizards down his back in church. He says he’s outgrown the fear, but that is what frightened him when he was young.”

Count Drake threaded his fingers together, a faint smile on his face. “I can work with that,” he said simply. He turned to Miles, and his smile turned into a broad grin. “Thank you, my boy. You have been most helpful.”

Without another word, the count stood and walked out of the church.

Miles sat stunned, trying to make sense of what had happened. He had not meant to be “most helpful.” Sir George had said he was no longer afraid of scaled things. How could that help the count?

Miles bowed his head and began to pray, in case speaking to the count had been a terrible mistake. He had managed only a few halting words when an enormous crash shook the church. His stomach clenched as chips of stone rained from the ceiling.

Yes. He had, in fact, made a huge mistake.

He leaped to his feet and cried. “Into the catacombs! It’ll be the safest place.”

The other parishioners screamed and scrambled about. Miles launched into action, guiding as many of them toward the stairs that led under the church. Larger and larger debris fell from the ceiling, and he knew he wouldn’t have long before the whole thing caved in.

He was about to escape himself, when he heard a cry, just loud enough to be heard over the noise and confusion. Whirling in the direction of the sound, he saw a young girl, cowering under a pew. There was no one else in sight, and the ancient wooden bench wouldn’t provide much protection if the roof gave way.

Fear froze him to the spot as a loud cracking sound reverberated from overhead. He closed his eyes for a moment, and he could see his master’s face. George wouldn’t hesitate. Neither should he. With a loud cry of his own, Miles rushed forward, weaving back and forth to avoid falling stones. He snatched the little girl and pressed her against his shoulder as he ran, not daring to look up or look back as he ran for the stairs. Halfway there, he stumbled and nearly tripped, barely keeping his grip on the girl.

Summoning all the courage he was capable of, he lowered his head and ran the rest of the way, passing into the stairwell only instants before the falling stones barricaded the entrance.

He stood for long moments, trying to slow his breathing. The child clung to him as though he were the rope that kept her from sinking beneath the sea. He wanted to claw his way out, to run to warn George. But his master would see the smoke soon enough. This was up to George now. Miles knew he couldn't personally slay dragons, but for now, there was something he could do.

Swallowing hard, he patted her back and whispered softly. "Let's go find your parents."

The girl only held him tighter.



Sir George trudged out of the forest, shoulders slumped. He had tangled with several of its denizens, but none had given him much trouble. Even the mimic tree that had invited him to nap beneath its branches—so it could devour him in his sleep—had been painfully obvious.

He wiped the light perspiration from his brow, looking toward the mountains. Perhaps there would be other challenges there after all? But the day was drawing on, and the sun was already beginning to descend. He had vowed to complete the quest that day. If he traveled into the mountains, would he even have time?

He clutched the cage hanging beneath his armor. Was he letting everyone down? Perhaps he was not meant to become a paladin, even if the honor had run in his family for generations. Perhaps the line ended with him, and he would simply have to accept it.

Turning his eyes back toward the village, he stopped cold. A huge plume of smoke emanated from the outskirts of town. Something was on fire, and from the volume of billowing black clouds, it wasn't a little fire.

Quiet resolve settled over him. This was his moment. He would rush toward the danger while everyone else fled.

Taking a deep breath, he charged down the road as fast as he could, eager to discover the source of the smoke.

As he neared the village, the source of the smoke became unmistakable. An enormous black-scaled dragon crouched atop the church—the very place he had sent Miles.

He prayed the lad was not inside. Smoke poured from the dragon's maw in a dark pillar. Where had the creature come from, and why had it chosen a church? Dragons usually descended upon treasuries or armories, places where valuables were kept.

As he approached, the dragon lowered its head and stared at him. "George," it bellowed, "come and face me."

In that moment, George understood. This was no wild beast, and its perch was no accident. One of Count Drake's dark gifts had allowed him to assume this form and draw George out. Unfortunately, changing his form was not a gift granted to a paladin for any of their quests.

Drake had chosen both the scales and the church with care. Worse, Miles was likely inside. The count had woven George's childish fear together with the deeper terrors he had confessed at the crossroads.

George drew his sword and raised his shield and called out to the great beast. "I'm here. Count, you appear to be taking your last name too seriously. That's me you want. You don't need to hurt anyone."

The dragon rose to its full height atop the church, gazing down at him. "Your squire is trapped inside," he growled, "and I will hurt him if you do not agree to fight me. I sear him with my fire and devour whatever remains."

George's heart seized, thinking of the lad trapped inside the church, probably terrified out of his mind. "Yes, there's no need for that," George cried. "Let him go. I'll face you. You have my word as a knight."

The dragon cackled and spread its wings to their full breadth. Onlookers screamed and fled as it belched a wave of fire into the sky. "Then come at me, George. Too long you have looked down your nose at me with your self-righteous pride. This duel is long overdue."

The dragon leapt from the roof and spewed flame at Sir George. He raised his shield and crouched behind it as fire streamed to either side. He had never tested the shield against dragon flame, and he had no hope of closing the distance while the creature kept breathing fire. He pictured a crossbow, and the weapon in his hand flowed into a new shape.

As soon as the next burst subsided, he leaned from behind the shield and fired at the dragon's neck. The heavy bolt struck, glanced from the sturdy scales, and spun harmlessly away. The dragon laughed, flames licking from its mouth with every chuckle.

"Oh, you're going to have to do much better than that. We drakes are made of sturdy stuff."

The dragon whipped his spiked tail around, and George jumped out of the way, landing on his shield and sliding along the ground, barely out of its path.

Thinking quickly, he reshaped the crossbow into a heavy chain with a handle at one end. He deflected the dragon's next fiery strike with his shield, swung the chain, and sent it looping around the creature's neck. The instant it snapped into place, he pulled hard, trying to cinch it tight and force the beast into submission.

The dragon reared and thrashed against the chain, roaring so loudly the earth seemed to shake. George's gauntlets slipped along the handle. With one violent toss of its head, the dragon tore the chain from his grasp.

The moment the handle left his hand, the chain collapsed into a metal sphere and bounced out of reach. An instant later, George ducked behind his shield as the drake bathed the square in fire.

"Try again, little knight," the dragon roared, "though I can't see how without your sword."

He had only one sphere left, and it formed his shield. If he changed it, how could he protect himself from the flames? Yet if he remained on the defensive, how could he win? Somehow, he had to draw the dragon away from the church long enough for Miles and the others to escape.

"Perhaps you'd like a fairer fight," George called. "Come—let us duel as we used to. Sword against sword, cold steel ringing on cold steel."

"I'm a nemesis now, little knight," the dragon grunted. "I don't believe in fair fights. I believe in power and its proper application."

"If that's unfair to you, then you picked the wrong side."

George drew a deep breath. His hands trembled; his heartbeat thundered in his ears. He could imagine the voices of the terrified parishioners rising from the catacombs and feel the sweat running down his brow. The scales awakened an old dread, but the greater fear was behind the dragon: Miles, the priest, and perhaps half the congregation trapped beneath a crumbling building. George could fail them. He could die without setting any of them free. This was the fear he had been unable to manufacture.

George chose to advance through it.

Trusting to surprise, George raised his shield and charged, swinging it from side to side and shouting as loudly as he could. The dragon recoiled. As George closed the distance, he pictured the weapon he would form.

He would likely get only one strike. He imagined a great two-handed sword, the kind used for felling enormous trolls or hill giants. He swung with all his might, aiming for the base of the dragon's neck.

Before the blade could connect, a crushing weight slammed him to the ground. He looked up into the dragon's grinning face, fire burning in its eyes and seeping between its teeth.

He was pinned under one of the dragon's enormous claws. There was no way to wriggle out from underneath.

"Gotcha!" the dragon hissed.

George dissolved the sword back into a metal sphere and concealed it in one hand. The dragon opened its jaws, fire gathering deep in its exposed throat. Then warmth and peace spread through George's body.

He knew the sensation: the pawn had accepted his deed. He had completed the Quest of Courage.

If he was to die, at least he would die among the brave.

Then the fourth gift awakened.

As he looked up at the dragon, its mind opened before him, chaotic and swirling as a whirlpool. At the bottom lay a memory lodged like a dagger.

They were young men again, dressed in their finest at a midsummer ball. Percy had wanted to dance with a beautiful young countess from a neighboring kingdom, and George had urged him to ask her.

But when Percy approached her, George had stood behind him and pulled ridiculous faces. He had meant only to tease his friend; instead, he had humiliated him. The countess rejected Percy, and Percy stormed from the ball.

It had happened so long ago. Yet beneath that single humiliation, George sensed years of smaller wounds—jests dismissed too quickly, apologies never offered, resentments the dark order had taught Percy to feed.

Instinctively, George reached through the new gift and touched the wound in Percy's mind—not erasing it, but quieting its power over him. He could soothe and calm, but his powers would not blot out Percy's bad memories or manufacture forgiveness where there was none. He only hoped his gentle guidance would be enough.

"I'm sorry," George said. "I made you the butt of a joke when I should have stood beside you. I cannot undo it, but you need not carry it forever. Had I the chance again, I would have praised you to the countess until she danced with no one else all evening."

The flames in the dragon's throat went out. The beast stood stunned, its gaze darting from side to side as though it had forgotten what to do. Then George saw that the scales along its neck did not extend beneath its chin.

There, the skin was smooth and unprotected.

He hated to strike at the moment Percy's defenses had fallen, but he had to end the duel and save everyone in the church and the village. He raised his sword slightly and then lowered it again, searching his heart. Was there any room for mercy here? Could he show compassion to the evil man Percy had become?

But the people. Miles. He had a duty to them too. As much as it pained him, Percy had made his own choice. He could not let the innocent suffer to that.

Clenching his teeth, George reshaped the sword into a crossbow and fired one-handed at close range. The bolt sank into the dragon's neck.

The dragon released him and staggered back. As it writhed and bellowed, its body shrank, wings and tail retracting until Count Drake stood in its place.

The bolt had vanished with the transformation, but the count clutched a bleeding wound in his neck. He would survive—if he allowed someone to tend it.

Right away, the count's eyes met George's. A tiny bit of fire returned, though only a pale spark of what had been there before.

"You take this first contest, George, but it will not be the last. There are other ranks to climb and other quests to complete. When you see me again, do not lower your guard."

George nodded solemnly. "Yes, old friend, I will remember that. But again, I am truly sorry."

The count bared his teeth and backed away. Darkness gathered around him, and in a swirl of smoke, he vanished. Though his Nemesis was gone, the dark power given by his order would sustain his life, even through a grievous wound. This had only been their first battle, the opening salvo of much more to come.

At least now, he would be ready.

"Sir George!"

It was Miles's voice. He turned toward the church and saw his squire running toward him. Without a second thought, the lad threw his arms around him, and George returned the embrace.

"There, there, lad. It's all right."

"The dragon's gone. Did you kill it?"

"No. I just drove it away. With the dark powers he now possesses, it is not easy for him to fall in battle."

Miles shuddered as a sob tore from his throat. "I'm so sorry, sir. He found me in the church. He said I should tell him what you were afraid of—that it would help you. I told him about the lizards. This is all my fault."

George rested a hand on his squire's shoulder. "Do not blame yourself, lad. The fault belongs to the man who deceived you. And, in the end, his trap became the test of courage I needed. I have completed all four quests and defeated my nemesis. It is time for me to take my place among the paladin Order."

He held up the white pawn in its holder. "It is time I exchange this for a knight. And then it's on to new quests and new tests. I only pray that I am up to the task."

Miles beamed, wiping the tears from his face. "Bigger tests than fighting a dragon? I can't even image that."

"I suppose we shall see," George said. "I must ride for Camelot at once, where they still hold the ceremony. You are coming too."

Miles drew back, his eyes wide. "Really? I've always wanted to see it. When do we leave?"

"As soon as we can—after I have cleaned up a bit."

Another voice called from the church. "George? Is that Sir George? Is that you?"

It was an old man's voice, one he recognized. He turned and saw the elderly priest in simple robes. Only a few tufts of white hair remained on his head, but his sparkling blue eyes held a vitality that belied his years.

"Father William," George said, bowing low. "I'm glad to see that you are unhurt, though I regret the damage caused to the church. I will do what I can to assist in the repairs."

Father William approached, laid a hand over George's, and smiled. "Oh, I'm sure you will. There is nothing we cannot mend with enough determination. It is not the first time someone has tried to knock down the old place. But, George, what you did today—I wanted to thank you."

"As you know, the catacombs beneath the church hold the bones of saints long gone—precious relics a dragon might have carried off, had you not intervened. And that's not to mention the countless lives your quick actions saved."

Father William released George's hand and clapped him on the back. "You're a saint, George. A saint."

George lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, surely that has to come from a bit of a higher authority, don't you think?"

"Oh, I suppose we'll still have to make it official," the old priest said. "But I'm going to get started on that right away. I shall write to the church fathers with the tales of your miraculous deeds."

"There is no need for that," George said. "I only did what duty required. There is nothing terribly saintly in it."

"Just let him do it, Master," Miles said with a laugh. "I can tell he truly wants to."

"Very well. Come, lad. It's a long way to Camelot."

With an arm around his squire, George made his way into town. The road to Camelot would be long, and Percy's warning weighed heavily on him. Yet his steps felt lighter than they had in years. At last, he was on his way.

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