

GreenWings

By

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A good story should start with a dragon and end with a dragon. So thought young Simon, prince and heir to the tiny kingdom of Passado. Greenwings was such a dragon. He had all the required dragon characteristics. A huge serpent covered in scales, enormous teeth which filled his fierce mouth. He had fiery breath, particularly when he didn't clean his teeth properly after eating certain vital herbs and spices. Greenwings, of course, had large deep, dark, dragon wings with purple and yellow scales underneath. The only non-conformist fact about this dragon was that Greenwings did not eat maidens. In fact he had never developed a taste for flesh of any kind, in short he was barely shy of being a vegetarian. For this reason, Greenwings had always been a bit of an outcast from dragon society. He was often spurned by the royal dragons of Passado, a great disappointment to his parents, who came from a long line of maiden-eating person-scaring dragons of Passado. Greenwings' diet was enhanced by one of the rare commodities of Passado, coal. A certain type of high grade coal was required by the dragon metabolism, dragon fire is no accident but a necessary consequence of a strange biology, which doomed dragons in general to ultimate extinction. Coal was in very short supply in Passado and the fact that it was a vital part of dragon digestion made man and dragon in direct competition for this rare mineral which was one of the few ways the human population could keep the cold Passado winters at bay.

Apart from not eating human or other flesh, Greenwings was a normal dragon in every other respect. He enjoyed flying and was very good at it. He also enjoyed using his dragon fire to burn down occasional trees, taking them out with a casual snort through a single nostril. He knew this to be bad in general for the environment but allowed himself an occasional indulgence. He did try to target dead or dying trees. Once, Greenwings had come up against a wizard who seemed to hold a grudge against dragons. Greenwings knew that wizards would often hunt dragons because of the mystical power they believed to be invested in various dragon body parts, such as the scales and the teeth. On this occasion Greenwings had escaped the incident, although not without some battle scars, losing both a large yellow scale from his underbelly and a fang which had broken against a rock which the wizard had cleverly disguised as a tasty coal snack. The rock sheared one of Greenwings' most useful fangs and the dragon had developed thereafter a somewhat lopsided embarrassed look, which did nothing to help Greenwings frighten subsequent attacks by wizards. Fortunately, he hadn't met any so was happy to live his days in a high cave with a goodly supply of coal. Dragons sleep very well, sometimes for a hundred years at a stretch; the brief years of man are a catch in time for a dragon. The incident with the wizard had caught Greenwings in a morning flying excursive. He was doing an outside loop, starting from inverted flight using only a single wing flap. He did in fact manage the manoeuvre but brushed his underbelly against a prominent outcrop. A single scale was dislodged and fell to the ground. The fact that the same wizard who had captured Greenwings' tooth was to also harvest the scale by pure chance seems to be one of life's great coincidences that makes us believe that our Destiny is predetermined. For many years Greenwings had lived in peace high in the mountains and rarely had contact with the people of Passado. Dragons can fly for very long distances, needing little nourishment and as I mentioned can sleep, in human terms for a lifetime.

What of Simon of Passado? He was the one and only child of King Geoffrey. Simon's mother, Anne-Marie was only a distant memory in the child's mind. The king had lived alone for much of Simon's life, and Simon well remembered the circumstances of his mother's mysterious disappearance when he was but a lad of eleven years.

The day our story finds Simon was a special day in the history of Passado. It was the prince's 21st birthday and today was Princesday. There was a law in that country that governed the choice of mate for the heir to the throne. When the heir reached 21, the age of majority, the King or Queen would hold a great contest for all the eligible bachelors or spinsters who had, that year, also reached their majority and were not already betrothed. The winner of this competition would gain the hand of the heir to the throne. Simon's heart was indeed full that day. He knew who he most wanted to win the contest. King Geoffrey surveyed the crowd, today was a holiday in Passado and every citizen had turned out to witness this most important event. Four and twenty maidens had been carefully

selected from the many early contenders. Although the law permitted all eligible maidens to compete, the King had the right to veto any candidate. Tradition had it that only 24 would be selected for Pranceday. "For many years now we have suffered through long cold winters," declared the king in a great booming voice that every contestant could hear. "Today's task is simple, our supplies of coal are long since used up. Yet somewhere in this land there is the hope that more can be found. Today, we ask for but one bucketful of this precious warmth giving mineral. Simon let his eyes roam over the crowd. His father was given to making lengthy speeches and Simon found them repetitive and predictable. First he looked at the eager group of young women who were competing for his hand in marriage. Only one of them really mattered to him but he knew he must be a dutiful son and a person who must be seen to uphold the country's tradition and indeed the law of the land and devote himself to whomsoever won the day. Kathleen, slim blond, athletic, flexed her fine muscled body, and met Simon's gaze with a steady and cunning look. She knew that she was the favourite to win the event, and Simon knew it too.

Kathleen's sister, Gertrude was indeed her twin but there seemed to be little resemblance between the young women. Gertrude was a lot smaller than Kathleen, she had dark hair and wore it swept back in a tight bun. She wore heavy lenses to help her short sightedness, but nevertheless her eyes sparkled with purpose. She was dressed appropriately in practical garb, for nobody could predict the precise nature of Pranceday and different Kings would demand different tasks to be completed. Gertrude was low down in the ratings despite her intelligence as Gertrude, being the town librarian, was perhaps one of the best read of the competitors. She also had the distinction of being the only one who had already won the Prince's heart. Simon's eyes caught a glint reflecting from the King's immediate advisors. He saw it was a reflection from the curious bauble worn as a kind of badge of office by Stick, the court wizard. Simon had taken great care to avoid Stick ever since the day his mother had disappeared and Stick had told them she had been taken by a dragon. To this day Simon doubted the story that Stick had told and would have investigated further only he was forbidden to go anywhere near the dragon's lair which lay quite close to the castle. Stick played with the bauble around his neck, two glass prisms, one inverted and fused to the other. Stick's predecessor had also worn the bauble, old Brackenbark had lived to the ripe old age of 150 years according to some folk. When old BB as he was affectionately known, finally died, Stick had taken his position and the glass bauble.

Stick had not in fact been chosen by Brackenbark as Simon had always thought. In fact Stick was not qualified in any way to become a court wizard. Brackenbark had always managed to avoid Death's icy touch and had never bothered to choose a suitable apprentice and successor. Stick had in fact been an orphan whom the King had let wait on old BB in return for a comfortable place in the castle. BB did not really approve of Stick, but merely put up with him to humour the king and certainly never revealed to Stick the workings of any of his magic spells. Stick was grateful on the one hand that he had a place to rest his head and food in his belly, but his ambition lay much, much higher than as a humble servant. Stick set his sights at a very early age on becoming court wizard. He knew that old BB would not teach him his craft and decided that he, Stick, would learn all he needed through his own guile.

Now, gentle reader I will take you back to an earlier time, to tell you just how Stick became the court wizard. Many years ago, Stick observed that the double prism that the old wizard took off on rare occasions and wore around his neck, was in fact a key. The key fitted a large box in which the wizard kept all the important and rare materials that enabled him to practice his craft. Such things should be carefully locked away because they often have a power of their own, and magic books and such can be very dangerous in the hands of those that mean harm. In all the years that Stick ever worked for Brackenbark, he only ever once had an opportunity to steal the magic key and then only for a few minutes. Stick, at first thought he could borrow the key while the wizard slept. Taking a wizard's key while the wizard is asleep is not a good idea, for invariably any wizard worth his position would protect himself and his key from such attempts, which Stick was intelligent enough to work out for himself. On the occasion when Stick finally did get the curious crystal key in his hand, BB was awake and in a terrible fury. For this was the day when a dragon had been seen flying over Passado. Brackenbark had been in the middle of a lengthy and complex spell that had taken months to reach fruition and he was not pleased to have his work interrupted, losing weeks of carefully planned magic.

The King had demanded instant action and of course the wizard was the person most qualified to deal with a magical beast such as a dragon. Brackenbark set off to pay the dragon a visit, leaving the crystal key in the magical lock. This was the first time in Stick's memory that BB had forgotten the magical key. Of course after a short distance Brackenbark remembered and dispatched Stick to bring it directly back to him. Stick seized his opportunity. He knew that Brackenbark would count the minutes he was parted from the magic key and that he

must not take more than a few extra minutes or the wizard would become suspicious. In those few stolen minutes, Stick opened the magical chest and seized the largest and most impressive of the magic books. He opened it at a random page and read the spell that lay there and tried to commit it to memory. This done and in terror of being discovered by the wily old wizard, Stick locked up the chest and made all haste to give the key back to Brackenbark. Old BB was in too much of a rage to notice precisely how long Stick had been gone and merely chastised him for his tardiness. The old wizard led them directly to the dragon's cave. Finding dragons is very easy for a good wizard. Stick was left outside, for which Stick was grateful. What passed between Brackenbark and Greenwings, for it was indeed our original dragon who had made his home in Passado, Stick nor ourselves will ever know, dear reader. Greenwings did not bother the citizens and BB swore Stick to such an oath of secrecy as to the location of the dragon cave, that even after BB's death Stick trembled at the thought of revealing this secret.

Not long after this incident, in Simon's tenth year, old Brackenbark finally succumbed to a bad winter fever and passed into the next world. Stick saw an opportunity for advancement at last. If his plan worked out he would better himself and take old Brackenbark's job as court wizard. The one spell that Stick had by chance learned in that brief encounter with the magic book, was a spell of ventriloquism. Not the ventriloquism of an artful smiling entertainer with his seemingly animated dummy, but real ventriloquism. Using this spell Stick hoped that he would be able to imitate the voice of anybody that he chose. He would make a voice spring from a rock if needs be. In fact, he used the spell well. He waited until the king and a group of the most prominent citizens of Passado were paying their last respects to Brackenbark. Stick concealed himself behind the tomb and put the spell into action. It worked perfectly. Old BB's voice came from the tomb, commanded by Stick. "King Geoffrey, hear me, Brackenbark your loyal wizard". The likeness to old BB's voice was so faithful that the king and his retinue were struck dumb with fear and awe. A voice from beyond the grave proclaimed. "I leave my magic books and artifacts and indeed my position as court wizard to young Stick, the new wizard of Passado". At this point Stick found the voice would work no longer, however the damage had been done, the king was convinced that old BB had chosen his successor.

Stick, having found his place in Geoffrey's court, was still secretly terrified that he would be un-masked. There were many wise people in the town who would know if Stick were an able wizard or not. For this reason Stick made his second visit to Greenwing's cave. This time he laid his plans very carefully indeed. He now had access to all of the old wizard's artifacts. The double crystal key gave him access to the chest and the magic books which Stick started to read with interest and care. He tried casting the spells he read. Some of the lesser spells worked in a watered down kind of way, he successfully turned a grey rock a rather ugly shade of orange, but in the main most of his efforts were in vain.

The truth of the matter was that old BB was in general a very careful and powerful wizard. For those that know, incanting spells from a wizard's book does not in general release great magic. The magic comes from within the wizard and is learned with considerable effort. The fact that the ventriloquism had worked for Stick was something of an anomaly. Stick lived for years listening to BB's voice and it was not surprising that he could imitate it well. He had crouched close to the coffin, so again the voice throwing was not really of any great magical consequence. Soon Stick began to doubt if any magic had indeed taken place at all. One thing that the book did tell Stick was that a wizard needs to gather artifacts of power about him, in order to facilitate his magic. Three items were specifically mentioned again and again. These were the tooth and scale of a dragon and a ring of power. Stick was convinced that if he could get hold of the dragon's tooth and scale he would be well on the way to gaining a true wizard's power. The book had quite a lot to say on rings of power. It even showed a rather attractive drawing of such a ring, a lesser ring by all accounts but one of several made by Grad Grinder, an ancient ring maker who made over 50 such rings. Finding a ring of power was a problem and the book pointed out that after a few generations some of these rings had ended up in the hands of non-wizards. Unaware of the power of such a ring, the wearer may occasionally do some magic by accident. The picture showed a gold ring with a circle of tiny rubies around a large green stone. Stick wanted very badly to find such a ring, and to his annoyance he actually thought he might have seen a Grad Grinder ring worn by somebody in the castle. Since he couldn't remember who or where, he set his mind to obtaining the dragon's claw and scale.

At this time Simon had reached his tenth birthday and had become firm friends with Gertrude. She was the same age as Simon but somewhat more mature in stature and the Queen let them play together with the understanding that Gertrude would look out for the young Prince and would not let him get into danger. So it was that Gertrude and Simon were allowed to leave the castle grounds and go for walks in the hills. On this occasion they were playing at

prospecting, a favourite pastime as coal was such a rare commodity they knew they would be well rewarded if they found an unknown seam. Their exploits outside the castle had got them into trouble in the previous year. The Pitchbog was a swampy area of land not far from the castle that contained deadly pockets of mud as black as pitch and very dangerous. The unsuspecting person who accidentally fell into such a pocket would be sucked slowly down to be drowned in the terrible black mud. Simon had in fact stumbled into such a pit, fortunately a small one and the quick thinking Gertrude was able to pull him out before more than his pride and his clothes were hurt. Despite their protestations they were not allowed out for some considerable time after this event and lectured constantly on the dangers of this forbidden area.

Two days after Simon was ten, he and Gertrude set off into the hills behind the castle prospecting for coal. What the children did not know was that Stick had also left the castle that morning with great purpose in mind. Stick arrived at Greenwing's Cave. The children of course knew nothing of the dragon sleeping in his cave not so very far from the castle. Stick was mortally afraid of the dragon, but he had a reasonable plan to get a dragon's tooth and expose himself to a minimum of danger. Stick's reasoning was thus; dragon's spend much of their time asleep, the chances were that Greenwings would be asleep when he arrived at the cave and he would not be in imminent danger. The second fact he knew about dragons was that they kept a supply of coal on hand as they often felt hungry when they woke up and would have a few lumps of coal close by to satisfy their urgent hunger. Dragons teeth are extremely strong and can easily bite through coal, however they were unlikely to be able to bite through rock. So Stick had stopped at the Pitch Bog on his way to the dragon's cave and filled a bottle with the black mud. He selected a very hard, solid boulder that he found near the cave entrance, coated it in the black mud, and left it to dry in the sun. A little while later he took the boulder, which now looked like a large lump of coal and advanced carefully to the mouth of the cave. Now came the most difficult part of his plan, he had to place the black rock as close as possible to the sleeping dragon. When the dragon woke he would bite the rock in mistake for coal and hopefully, thought Stick, would break a tooth. Stick assumed that the dragon would seek water to soothe his pain, and leave the cave for long enough for Stick to steal the tooth. Stick hadn't quite thought out how he would wake the dragon and make him bite the black rock. At that moment all he could think of was not waking the sleeping dragon. He approached the cave entrance and felt the same fear that he had experienced the last time he had visited the cave years before with Brackenbark. He felt a great urge to forget the plan and run as the sounds of a snoring dragon became louder when he entered the cave mouth. He froze while he let his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness. He was closer than he realised to the huge bulk of the dragon. The smell was very strong and he had to be careful to avoid the bursts of hot breath that heated the air around him. He moved a few paces closer as close as he dared be to the frightful beast and was about to set the rock on the ground when a dangerous low growling sound rooted him to the spot with fear. "Who disturbs the slumbers of Greenwings the Dragon? Is that you Oh wizard of Passado? What brings you back to my cave?" "It is very hard to creep up on a sleeping dragon without waking it up. Not that I recommend, dear reader that you try this for sport, dragons are often very grumpy when they wake up after a long sleep and their breath smells very bad. "Oh, so it is the wizard's miserable assistant, I know you were too frightened to pay me the complement of a visit when your master paid his respects. Set down the gift from your master and be gone, I can smell your fear." "It is ironic that dragons invoke such fear in people that it actually has a tangible smell which is very unpleasant to the dragon. Often this causes even a pleasant dragon like Greenwings to growl and breath fire causing more fear and a worse smell in a vicious circle. Stick needed no further encouragement, he placed the black rock at the dragons feet and ran from the cave.

A waking dragon generates a fair amount of smoke. The prince and Gertrude had been close to the cave when Simon saw smoke coming from a hole in the rocks above them. Since they were prospecting, finding smoke was perfectly in tune with their game. The kids eagerly climbed the rocks ahead and arrived at the cave a few minutes after Stick had run away in terror. Stick had in fact stopped some way down the hillside wondering what the dragon would do if it bit into his lump of "coal." In particular he wondered if the dragon would come after him. At that moment a terrible roar of pain came from the cave. Greenwings had in fact bitten the rock, broken his tooth as Stick had hoped and was thrashing back and forth at the entrance to his cave. The appearance of two small children at that instant did not soothe the dragon's ill humour, but Greenwings was not a particularly vindictive dragon. He knew that the kids had nothing to do with this terrible prank which had been played on him by the wretched wizard and his servant. Besides, the wizard had made a non-aggression pact with the dragon. He had promised he would tell nobody of the location of the cave and the dragon had promised he would not molest members of the local population. Wasn't this invasion a violation of the agreement?

Simon and Gertrude were so frightened by the sight of the injured and angry dragon that they really could not move. Eventually Gertrude made a sound which was intended to be "Run!" but came out as a muffled cry which prompted Greenwings to break the spell. "Young ones, I mean you no harm. I broke my tooth on that black rock, biting it in mistake for coal. Gertrude straightened herself up, she felt she ought to protect the young Prince but the dragon had declared peaceful intentions so she was a little confused. How did one behave in front of a dragon? In the end her kindly nature won through and all she could say was; "I have some soothing oils back at the castle." Greenwings was quite charmed by this sincere offer of help from such a young person and responded immediately. "Young lady, gentleman, I would appreciate soothing oils very much, would you permit me to take you to the castle?" Simon had also overcome his initial fear. "Do you mean ride on your back?" "Climb up my scales young people, you are about to have the ride of a lifetime." Gertrude was convinced that this was something the Queen would not approve of but she could see the wild enthusiasm in Simon's eyes and knew she could not prevent him from taking up this amazing offer. They had a whispered conversation where she made some feeble attempts to warn him of what his mother might say but in the end Simon pulled royal rank and the children scrambled up onto the back of the kindly dragon.

With a woosh of wing beaten air the dragon and his passengers took off. Flying of course was completely outside the experience of anybody in Passado. They had no machines to give them such thrills. Simon and Gertrude were thrilled and scared at the same time. At first Greenwings took off and steadily climbed above his cave. He circled above banking at about 20 degrees his great green wings sparkling in the sun light. The thrill of the steep turn and sudden view of the impending ground below made both children cling to Greenwings scales like their life depended on it, which of course it did. Swooping low to the ground Greenwings gave a couple of flaps to his huge wings and glided down the hillside towards the castle. He mostly flew just above the tree tops, partly to give the thrill of speed to his eager passengers and partly to avoid observation. Greenwings knew enough about human ways that he didn't want to be observed bearing passengers. He came into a smooth landing close to the castle grounds but well sheltered by trees. Fortunately the castle was between the dragon and the town lessening the chance of being seen.

Gertrude dismounted and ran off in the direction of the castle. Simon carefully dismounted and faced the huge dragon with an amazing calm. Riding the dragons back had formed a bond of trust between boy and dragon and Simon was confident that Greenwings had no intention of eating him. They faced each other and Simon asked many questions about how a dragon lives and what he eats and so forth. Simon was amazed to find out that Greenwings lived on a diet of trees and coal and had no interest in red meat. Greenwings assured Simon that this was quite unusual for a dragon. Then Greenwings turned to Simon and asked, "why did the wizards servant try and hurt me with the black painted rock?" Simon knew nothing of what Greenwings had seen before he bit the hard rock and Greenwings described the events just before the children arrived at the cave. Simon was explaining to Greenwings that the old wizard was dead and he had no knowledge of Stick's motives when Gertrude returned, "don't swallow," she cautioned. She handed him the bottle. The soothing oils did much to help the dragon and he was very grateful. "Another ride?" asked Greenwings. The children scrambled on, "Can you do some really spectacular flying," asked Simon. "Not too rough please," cautioned Gertrude.

They took off back in the general direction of the dragon's cave, high over the hillside Greenwings started pick up speed in a dive, "Hold very tight for this one", Greenwings booming voice could be heard above the wind as it rushed over them. "Do you want to do a loop?" It wasn't a question. They clung to the scales and leaned against the horns that grew from the dragons neck. He sped back up to the top of a rocky ridge then rolled onto his back and nose dived into an outside loop which pinned the children hard to the dragon's back. He bottomed out of the loop judging his height to a scales width above the ground. Perhaps it was the added weight of the children on his neck that caused the dragon to just touch the rocky ridge, not enough to cause any alterations to his flight but enough to dislodge a belly scale, which tumbled back down and landed right outside his cave. "Ouch!" said Greenwings.

Stick had watched Greenwings take off and was amazed at his luck. He rushed into the cave as soon as the dragon was out of sight. It took him a few minutes to locate the broken tooth and he carefully placed it in a bag. Stick looked around the cave but could see no scales. Greenwings was a young dragon and had not shed any scales. Dragons do occasionally shed them and they take decades to grow back. Stick's mission was at least partially successful so he left the cave with a certain amount of relief only to find the dragon diving out of the sky towards him, terrified he hid behind some rocks and watched with amazement as the dragon performed his aerobatics. He couldn't believe his luck as the dragon brushed the outcrop and the scale fell almost at Stick's feet. Picking it up he ran back down the hillside and didn't stop until he was safely inside the castle. Something bothered him. He went

over the events of the day and reviewed in his mind the frightening sight of the dragon diving at him out of the sky and pulling up at the last minute. There was something not right, it clicked into place in his head. There had been something, no two somethings on the dragon's back. Two small people, children. Stick had a very shrewd idea as to who those children could be. He carefully filed this thought away in his mind, the time would come when he could turn this information to his advantage.

Although Stick had a certain amount of success with the tooth and scale as power elements for his spells, in general his power was still very much limited. He dreamed of the ring with the large green stone and it filled his waking thoughts also. Simon's eleventh birthday held a special place in the traditions of Passado. There was a formal ceremony of acknowledgement that was attended by the entire court. Ceremonial dress was worn and Stick naturally turned out in the most ostentatious of robes he could find in old Brackenbark's wardrobe. He stood at the King's left side as was his traditional place and contributed very little to the ceremony of the occasion. At the end of the event Stick bowed before the King and Queen and as he rose to take his leave he was frozen to the spot. There was the ring of power on the third finger of the Queen's right hand. He had been so preoccupied with discovering this ring that actually finding it in an accidental way completely confused the would-be wizard. In a daze he returned to his chambers and for the next three days he went without sleep trying to come up with a plan to steal the ring from the Queen. What made it worse was that in the weeks that followed the Queen took to wearing the ring on a daily basis. Everyday the wretched ring would be right in front of his face whenever he attended the Queen. It was driving him insane, he must have the ring!

Gertrude and her sister, Kathleen did not play together. They were opposite in all their likes and dislikes and for twins were very different in appearance. Where Gertrude was small and had a tendency towards overweight, Kathleen at 11 was slim and blond and had an artful smile which won the hearts of all those around her who did not look too closely at the character of this child. While Kathleen could charm anything she desired from her guardians, she could not win the friendship of her twin sister. Orphaned when their parents had been killed in a riding accident, the girls had become wards of the state and been given rooms at the castle. They performed small chores and were educated with the other children in the castle, for some subjects this included the Prince who was their own age. Passado was a country where equal opportunity was practiced and beggars and Princes attended the same school. Kathleen and Gertrude were in fact favourites of the King, although the Queen did not share his liking for them. The girls would be given chores which sometimes would even include waiting on the royal couple in their private apartments. Thus Kathleen, Gertrude and Simon grew up in the same household. Kathleen was particularly proud of her status with the King and would brag about it to the other children. She was ambitious and cultivated the acquaintance of those adults who found her so charming, particularly if they held positions of power within the castle. She was not blind to the fact that one day she might marry the Prince and become Queen. It did not matter to her that she could not win the Prince's friendship, and the spiteful barbs she aimed at her sister upset the Prince and he would not listen to ill words about Gertrude. It only mattered to her that on the Prince's 21st birthday she would be eligible to compete for his hand and therefore dedicated herself to becoming a perfect athlete.

Stick was not blind to Kathleen's precocious behaviour, and her ambitions where the Prince was concerned were well known throughout the court. Stick spent many long hours contemplating how he could turn Kathleen's ambitions to his own advantage. A few weeks after Stick gained possession of the dragon tooth and scale, he engaged in a series of spells he believed would enhance his power. After some months he had reached a section of the magic book devoted to changing a person's appearance and using scale and tooth of dragon he had mixed a quantity of potion he believed would give him success. Stick was contemplating how best to try out this spell when a knock sounded at his door and Kathleen strode into his chambers. He had had little direct contact with the child and was surprised by her directness of speech and imperious manner with which she treated him. "There are rumours that Gertrude and Simon have a secret hiding place in the hills, they are concealing some big secret there. I have tried following them but Gertrude is too sharp for me. I want a spell to enable me to find this secret." Stick guessed at once that the children were continuing to visit the dragon. "I can help you, my dear," said Stick. Helping somebody who might likely become the next Queen of Passado could only be to Stick's advantage. "Take this small bottle. Concentrate your mind on whomsoever you want to resemble and when next you wake your features will have changed. Perhaps a disguise of your sister's likeness will make it easy for you to persuade the Prince to reveal his secret." "I will not forget this courtesy," said Kathleen and took her leave directly.

The next day Kathleen carefully swallowed half the potion, reasoning that half would be sufficient for a child. Concentrating hard in front of her mirror she felt a sudden pain and she doubled over and passed out on the floor.

When she finally awoke she felt surprisingly refreshed. She looked into the mirror and was amazed to find that it was Gertrude's face looking back at her. She quickly put her plan into action. It was still early in the day and she found the Prince before her sister had risen. Simon suspected nothing and readily agreed to visit their secret hide out.

The next day the Queen was furious. Kathleen's duplicity had worked so well that she had discovered the secret of Greenwings with no real effort. To discredit Gertrude she had simply made some remarks within the Queen's hearing; "Simon is playing with death, he visits the dragon's cave ... " Queen Anne-Marie confronted both Simon and Gertrude. They made no secret of their dealings with the dragon, the only piece of information they held back was that Stick had been involved. If they had known a little more about the workings of the world they may have saved a woman's life by telling all they knew, but that, dear reader is merely conjecture.

The Queen had appreciated their honesty and concluded that the dragon was probably less of a threat than the court had first assumed, after all there had been no trouble since old Brackenbark had paid his visit to the dragon. The story of the wild ride on the dragon's back and the soothing oils for his broken tooth were too wild for an eleven year old imagination and actually had a ring of truth which put the dragon in rather a good light. The Queen decided that she would not come down too hard on the children and simply forbade them from further visits to the dragon's cave. Naturally Gertrude and Simon were bitterly disappointed but they would not go against the Queen's wishes for her word was the law. The Queen was particularly interested in how Kathleen had come to know about the activities of her son. She had observed the strong friendship between Gertrude and Simon and the enmity between the sisters. The Queen suspected that Kathleen had tried deliberately to get Simon and Gertrude into trouble and she was not impressed with Kathleen's integrity. The rift widened between her and Kathleen and this rift was to deepen in the weeks to come.

A number of small incidents, all incited by Stick, put Kathleen and the Queen further and further apart. Stick made sure by a crafty word here and a false report there that the Queen's ears heard of nothing but mischief from Kathleen. For Stick believed that Kathleen would become the instrument by which he would obtain the power ring, stealing such an item from a royal personage was not an easy task and Stick wanted to make sure that Kathleen had plenty of incentive to work against the Queen. So the Queen heaped a few more chores on the girl's shoulders and made Kathleen's activities come up against close scrutiny. Kathleen became more and more angered against the Queen. She was of course ignorant of the fact that it was Stick who was manipulating her. Stick, who with a word to the cook and a whispered word to the head groundsman, would bring Kathleen trouble from every quarter. Who trampled on the roses? Why Kathleen of course. Who stole the apple pie left cooling on a shelf? Kathleen was always to blame and could not plead her innocence as the evidence was often strongly against her.

At last, in a rage, Kathleen came to Stick for help. Again Kathleen asked directly for what she wanted. "I want a potion to make somebody forget?" "Why my child, what is bothering you?" Kathleen knew that Stick had helped her in the past and decided to tell him the truth, "It's the Queen, she believes that I am responsible for all sorts of mischief, I think if she would forget about some things that happened in the past she would leave me alone". Now Stick had researched potions that made the memory fail quite carefully. His idea was to take the Queen's ring then make her forget that she ever had a ring. Thus he could gain power but not rouse the suspicions of the court. "When are you next due to wait on the Queen, my dear?" "Tomorrow, on her walk". "Good, take this small bottle and make sure she drinks the contents." Stick saw a chance to do more than just win the favours of this young ambitious person, but also to gain the magic ring without any danger to himself. "There is one small favour that you can do for me, my dear." After a further half an hour of planning, Kathleen took her leave, her face flushed with purpose.

Now Kathleen was not a tidy person. The castle was not short of rooms and at eleven her request for her own space, separate from her sister had been granted. Kathleen was a collector. Her room so recently acquired was full of items she had collected from around the castle. Now she had two potion bottles from Stick and proudly squirreled them away amongst her collection. The next day she took both of her potions for she had used only half the bottle when she had changed her appearance. She intended to have fun with the Queen. It was a hot day and Kathleen and one of her regular maids, Miranda, were in attendance. Queen Anne-Marie was particularly fond of a certain type of herb that grew in only one place in Passado, the Pitchbog. For this reason the Queen always accompanied by her maid Miranda, were in the habit of taking afternoon walks in this dangerous region. Miranda was the daughter of a woodsman before she entered the Queen's service had learned the safe pathways through the Pitchbog. That

afternoon, Miranda led the Queen and Kathleen past the bubbling, bottomless pits of the black mud to a small grove. There along the rim of a mud pit grew a small crop of the Queen's herb.

Kathleen spread out a blanket on the grass and the Queen sat down and beckoned to Kathleen. "Well, my dear. We have been hearing some poor reports of your behaviour lately, I wanted you to come on this walk today to give you a chance to explain yourself". The Queen played casually with her ring as she spoke. Kathleen was not prepared to answer the Queen on this issue, she only wanted revenge. "I apologise m'am, I will mend my ways in future, m'am". Kathleen was intelligent enough to know that an excuse was not what was required. "Very well child, apologies accepted. I will trust you to mend your ways in future. I shall give you another chance, but this will be your last. You may serve the food." The Queen took off the magic ring and set it down on the blanket beside her. It is a curious twist of fate that if the Queen had chosen to keep the ring on her finger, none of the following events would have happened, at least not in the way they did. Kathleen took the vials of potion and readied them as she served the picnic to the two older women. She watched as the Queen ate her tainted food. Without the protection of the magic ring, she instantly fell to the ground in a deep sleep. Kathleen sprang forward feigning concern. "Your majesty, what is the matter?" She held the Queen's hand and at the same time searched around for the ring. Miranda was shocked, she had been with the Queen for many years, Kathleen's behaviour was odd, she seemed to be more concerned with searching the blanket than with the Queen's health.

The Queen had keeled over right after eating food, served by Kathleen, Miranda's suspicions were roused. "Kathleen, go back to the castle and summon help," she commanded. Kathleen rose to obey and before she could help it one of the glass vials that had contained the potions dropped to the ground. Miranda was no fool, she caught on very quickly. "You have poisoned her Majesty!" Miranda was no longer young, so when she grabbed Kathleen's arm she did not reckon on the strength of this young athlete. Their struggles took them to the very edge of the mud pit. Kathleen broke free and started to run. Miranda came after her but tripped over the picnic basket and plunged headlong straight into the mud pit and was swallowed up in a trice. Kathleen was at first dumfounded. She had not bargained for this. She could think of nothing except getting help and trying to explain her way out of it somehow. She threw the telltale bottles into the mud and rushed back to the castle to seek the aid of the wizard.

Stick had been worrying constantly about what would happen if Kathleen were caught stealing the ring, and would she tell of his part in the affair, when Kathleen rushed into his chambers. She blurted out her story and Stick returned at once to the Pitchbrog with Kathleen. When they reached the herb dell and the mud pit a very disturbing sight greeted them. Of the Queen there was no sign, but there was old Miranda, sitting up with a strange look on her face. "Where am I? Who am I? What am I doing here?" Stick turned to Kathleen who was terrified. "I saw her fall into the pit," whispered Kathleen, "I saw her!" Stick thought for a moment. "You gave the Queen both vials?" "Why yes." "Who was the first person the Queen saw after she had taken these potions?" Kathleen stopped, and turned to Stick in sudden realisation, this was not Miranda in front of them but the Queen. Memory gone and her face now changed. Stick took charge of the situation, they helped the Queen back to the castle and on the way explained that an accident had occurred. They persuaded the Queen that she was Miranda, her memory was gone, and to everybody at the castle she would be Miranda, who would doubt her appearance? A terrible accident had happened and the Queen had fallen into the mud pit.

Fortunately for both Kathleen and Stick the investigation into the accidental death of the Queen was surprisingly brief. The country entered mourning and "Miranda", who was very confused and not at all herself, was allowed to retire. Once the illusion of the Queen's death had been accepted, Stick realised that he would have to continue to drug the Queen with the potion of forgetfulness and the potion which maintained her false appearance. Everyday he would bring "Miranda" a health giving draft as he put it, however he lived in permanent dread of discovery. Stick had interrogated Kathleen concerning the ring but after an extensive search of the picnic site, could find no trace of the ring. His plan had been foiled although he had always viewed the Queen as his enemy so the fact that she was now completely in his power may not be such a bad thing after all.

The years rolled by. Stick's position at court became ever more tenuous. His inability to perform any of the magic for which his predecessor had been renowned did not go unnoticed. With the aid of the tooth and scale he had some minor successes, but in the main most people at court would replace him if they could. It was only a matter of time before the King's attention would be drawn to the subject of such a poor court wizard.

So let us return, gentle reader, to Princesday. We left Simon surveying the faces of the women competitors. As his father finished his speech the race began. Four and twenty women have at least four and twenty approaches to finding coal. Only two of the women were sure where they could find it. Simon saw Kathleen disappear into the castle followed very closely by Stick. For the first time Simon realised that there was some connection between these two. He rushed off to seek Gertrude. "Did you see Stick and Kathleen, I think they are in league." Gertrude smiled. "I have known this for some time, listen we must hurry, I have a plan. Go at once to the dragon cave, I will meet you there. I don't think Greenwings will be too willing to help Kathleen and Stick but you must get there ahead of them. I will not be far behind you." "Where are you going?" Gertrude smiled at him, "the Pitchbog, now go." Simon raced up the once familiar hillside and soon arrived at the cave. He was wary on two counts. One, he had not seen the dragon for ten years and did not know if he would be recognised, and two that Kathleen and Stick would have arrived ahead of him. In fact he needn't have worried about either count. Dragon's have much better memories than humans and Stick and Kathleen had no intention of going to the cave. All they had to do was wait in ambush. They knew that the dragon would likely be friendly towards Gertrude and give her the bucket of coal. They did not have to face a dragon but a small young woman with a large bucket of coal.

By the time Gertrude arrived at the cave, Greenwings and Simon were catching up on ten years of gossip. To Greenwings, ten years was not a long time, so he had hardly noticed that Simon and Gertrude had not been frequent visitors. He filled Gertrude's bucket with coal and noticed that she carried a second bucket. "I think we will have some trouble with Kathleen on the return, so this second bucket is my insurance," she said. Greenwings offered to fill the second bucket too but Gertrude declined. She produced a bottle filled with the black mud and set to work to gather some coal shaped boulders. "I said we needed insurance."

Gertrude sent Simon on ahead and told him not to worry. Simon returned to the castle and waited for Gertrude. An hour later she appeared, without any bucket and looking quite disheveled. Gertrude was not about to give any explanation for a minute later Kathleen ran onto the platform that had been set up outside the castle for the purpose, and declared to the King that she had fulfilled the quest. It did not take long for the crowd to reassemble. Nobody expected such fast results so there was a terrific noise amongst the crowd. The King stood up to address his subjects and the babble subsided. "Kathleen, have you fulfilled the task that you were set?" "I have, your majesty." She solemnly placed the bucket full of coal before the king. "Summon the court wizard," commanded the King. Stick pushed his way to the front and stood before the throne. "Please check the voracity of the coal, court wizard." A wood fire was quickly started and when it was hot enough Stick brought the bucket over to the fire, and took out the first lump. He was startled at the weight, he knew that Dragon coal heavier than most varieties but this seemed unduly heavy. He threw it on the fire. Now Pitchbog black mud contains a fair degree of sulphur and other chemicals that made it burn with an evil stench, once gone it revealed a plain, non-flammable rock. Many in the crowd recognised the smell of burning Pitchbog mud, and a great roar of "cheat" went up from the crowd. Stick seized another rock but it too would not burn. He swung round and faced Kathleen, "You have ruined everything, where are your brains, woman?" Kathleen sprang to her feet, "I have done nothing except help you with your plans, false wizard!" The angry Stick took a swipe at Kathleen which she easily dodged, she grabbed Stick by both his arms and pinned him to one of the support posts. Stick struggled and might well have broken free but a commanding voice from the crowd cried, "Stop." An old woman with a surprisingly strong step took her place on the platform. "I may be old but I am not stupid, wizard Stick," The crowd saw crazy old Miranda. Stick suddenly remembered that in the midst of this important day he had forgotten to bring the old woman her "health giving draft". "Old woman," Stick said kindly, he was trying to humour her now, "let me give you something to help you relax." He had already prepared the draft and had it about his person, it was only the delivery that had slipped his mind. He offered the old lady the bottle. Miranda smashed it from Stick's hand, and drew from her pocket something small and shiny which she held up before the King. King Geoffrey, this man has been giving me a drug to stop me from remembering my past, but this morning he did not deliver and some of memories have returned. Observe!" With that she slipped the ring of power on her finger. For a moment she fell to the ground but quickly revived, Gertrude standing nearby stepped in to help the old lady but she waved her away. As she rose from the ground a cry went up from the crowd. It was the long dead Queen Anne-Marie and not Miranda who faced them. "This ring of power has long been in my possession, although I have had little occasion to use it. But now, as you see, it has restored my features as well as my memory, robbed from me by this evil would-be wizard, Stick. A roar went up from the crowd, "and his ambitious accomplice, Kathleen. "Seize them!" cried the crowd, and the King's own guard sprang forward. The King took the Queen in his arms a look of pure joy on his face. Simon was about to embrace Gertrude when the King turned to her and said, "have you fulfilled the quest to make so bold as to embrace the Prince?" Gertrude smiled, she looked upwards and the crowd gasped with fear as Greenwings, whose

timing was impeccable descended onto the platform. He bowed, at least he did the best a dragon can do, to the King and Queen and laid at Gertrude's feet a bucket filled with the very finest dragon coal. She picked it up and turned to the King. "I have indeed, your majesty, and I earnestly request my prize be allowed to embrace me."

Once the citizens of Passado had been assured that the dragon was not going to eat anybody they showed their delight that Gertrude had earned the Prince's hand. The fact that she was also Simon's sweetheart sent the crowd into a delighted cheer. Stick and Kathleen quietly took their leave and were never seen in Passado again.

The story, of course, is not quite over as I explained before, a good story should start with a dragon and end with a dragon. Greenwings' days of sleeping in his cave, keeping away from the people of Passado were at an end. As he made yet another flight over the castle with children firmly affixed to his back, he wondered if perhaps he might be better off sleeping.

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With an acknowledgement to my many influences, including my children, who have heard many Greenwings stories, mainly told on long car journeys in Western Canada and also to Gavin Miller whose dragon story, "*Gregorian and the Three Witches*" is really excellent and to be found at : http://www.doctorgavin.com/Writing/Short_stories.html