Old nurse called it a "monstrous beast." The court scientist declared it "a peculiar specimen." Henry, the stable boy, remarked to no one in particular, "I thought it was a dragon." Despite its many names, everyone agreed about one thing. Something must be done, and soon. A royal council was called, but without King Malcolm, who was away making a treaty.

"Not that they'll decide anything, but it makes them feel productive." Henry confided to the old grey carthorse. Henry was not quite a stable boy. In a larger castle he would have been a squire. Castle Dernwater however, could not afford to keep a full time squire. So instead they kept Henry, the gangly fourteen year old son of a local landowner. He was employed in the stable most of the time but was taught fencing on Friday, Latin every other Tuesday, and history and geography alternatively on Wednesdays. Besides that, he was allowed to read in the castle library whenever he had time, and many afternoons found find him sitting in the library, engrossed in some dusty old volume. If the council had paid as much attention to the library as Henry, this story might have taken a completely different turn, but they did not.

Contrary to Henry's opinion, the council did in fact do something. Its first decision was to send the court scientist out to inspect, "this peculiar specimen." What the scientist's findings were, the council never learned, for the "peculiar specimen" promptly ate him.

The council convened again and, after a long discussion, decided to consult the castle annals. These were duly procured and, after much searching, it was found that only once before had a dragon wandered into the kingdom. It had made a nuisance of itself by eating the people's cattle, and matters had come to a head when it ate the king's prize Galloway bull for lunch one day. After a council meeting, it had been decided to give the king's daughter to the dragon. Not that the council or the king had wanted the princess to be eaten, but that way a hero – preferably a prince - would arrive to rescue her, and the dragon would be slain in the process. And that is exactly what had happened.

After reading this, there was much discussion amongst the present council. Most of the councilors liked the idea of dealing with such an important problem during the king's absence, not stopping to think what might happen to the present princess, Elizabeth, if their plan went wrong. Only a few councilors insisted that the council should wait to make a decision until King Malcolm returned, but they were overruled. Granted, Elizabeth was quite young, not yet thirteen, but the counselors agreed that fact was irrelevant. It was the spirit of the matter that counted, and the fact remained that Elizabeth was a princess. And, indubitably, princesses are apt to be rescued by heroes -preferably princes- who are well known for their skill in killing dragons. All in all, it was a grand scheme. At least, so thought most of the councilors.

Soon the whole castle was buzzing with the news. Princess Elizabeth was going to be given to the dragon! When Henry first heard this he laughed and said, "Oh, they can't have decided something so silly." But by the end of the day, Henry had to admit

that the council's decision was true. Then he began some serious thinking. Who could rescue Elizabeth?

Of course, Elizabeth had to be rescued. While no princess should ever be fed to a dragon, there are admittedly some who are unpleasant enough to invite such a fate. Not so with Elizabeth. She was the image of her late mother, and the apple of her father's eye. King Malcolm was too wise however to let her be spoiled. As a result, Elizabeth was one of the most delightful princesses you could wish to meet. She was quick and clever, with an open manner that was completely unpretentious and a kind word ready for anyone. Henry would have done anything for Elizabeth, so now he thought as hard as he could.

He knew of only two heroes. One of them was off fighting giant eels in the southern marshes. The other was confined to his bed after a particularly nasty encounter with a giant. No, they wouldn't be any help … Elizabeth's rescue was up to him, and he hadn't the faintest idea how to kill a dragon. Then Henry remembered a book he had seen in the castle library. It was a very old volume which chronicled the adventures of a dragon slayer. Perhaps it contained some helpful suggestions.

After reading late into the night, Henry reread the only helpful passage he had found in the book:

Of all the animals that we know, only one has the ability to unnerve a dragon, and that is a common cat. It has been observed that, on the occasion of a cat surprising it, a dragon will freeze suddenly and stand immobile for approximately one minute. However, this observation has not been tested to its fullest and should not be relied upon.

Certainly, it hadn't been tested to its fullest … but it just might work. Henry sat back and thought over all the cats in the castle. There were quite a few, but some were too old, some were too young. Oliver, the cook's cat, was too lazy. Sampson, the armory cat, was a horrible coward. And then there was Cedric, the foulest tempered cat that had ever paced the castle corridors. If any cat could unnerve a dragon, it would definitely be Cedric.

Next morning there was a great hustle and bustle in the castle courtyard as the council prepared to bring Princess Elizabeth out to the dragon. The princess herself was standing a little to the side, looking rather pale. Her nurse was engaged in conversation with Thomas, the head gardener. Suddenly Henry, rather breathless, and with a large bloody scratch running up his arm, appeared beside the princess. He gave her a medium sized basket and whispered something in her ear. The princess looked rather startled but nodded after a moment. It is good that Elizabeth's nurse, upon returning, was too excited to pay attention to the basket which was wobbling a good deal in Elizabeth's arms and emitting occasional growls.

The basket did catch the attention of a golden eagle, soaring lazily above the castle. He watched with interest as the figures moved out of the castle and onto the open

plain beside it. All of them clustered on the plain's edge, except the girl with the basket. She moved across the field while her basket continued to bump and swing in a most un-basketlike way.

Then the girl stopped as a huge dragon, formerly napping, began to lumber across the field toward her. Nearer … nearer … the eagle swooped lower, incredulous at what was about to occur. Then, the girl moved. She crouched and opened the lid of the basket. A cat shot out and dashed straight toward the dragon, letting out an angry yowl as it ran. Suddenly, it became aware of the dragon's presence. It stopped, swelled to double its size, and let out a string of what -in cat's speech- must have been dreadful curses. Then, with a final defiant swipe of one paw in the general direction of the dragon, the cat set off at a run, headed back toward the castle. The dragon stopped moving and at the same moment, from the group of watching figures, a boy broke loose and sprinted across the green, straight toward the dragon.

The eagle gave a harsh gasp at the youth's folly and waited for the dragon's response. But oddly, it didn't move. The running figure was closing the distance, pulling a sword from his scabbard, swinging it up in an arcing curve so that it glittered in the sun light. He reached the dragon and cut into it. It stood for a moment and then lurched toward the sword bearer. One step … two steps … a sheet of flames burst from its mouth … it moved slower … and slower … then it collapsed upon the ground. The eagle let out a shrill scream of victory and spiraled up into the sky. High above the plain his attention was caught by a group of riders galloping toward the castle.

King Malcolm and his entourage arrived less than five minutes after the dragon's death. After hearing a full explanation, King Malcolm knighted Henry. Then he confronted the council. All but the minority of the councilors, who had argued against the dragon scheme, were dismissed. Rather than letting the former councilors slink off to make trouble elsewhere, King Malcolm decided that they could stay in Dernwater in new positions. While they may not have been good councilors, they proved to be admirable bakers, gardeners, and swineherds. The cat, Cedric, to whom a great debt was owed, was allowed to stay in the castle for the rest of his days. He was treated with the utmost respect and deference, but unfortunately it did not alter his personality.

You will not be surprised to learn that Henry married Elizabeth when they were both grown. They were very happy together, and soon many children filled the castle. And the story that the children loved best was, "The Tale of the Monstrous Beast." At which Henry or Elizabeth would say gently, "You mean, the dragon." And Cedric would blink lazily up from a patch of sunlight as if to say, "Monstrous beast or dragon, I saw it, and if it hadn't been for me, things would have happened quite differently." And I suppose he is right.