St. George

April 23rd

St George's Day: The Feast of England's Patron Saint
Life: (early 4th century)

Patron of chivalry, and guardian saint of England and Portugal. He may have been tortured and put to death by Diocletian at Nicomedia, or he may have suffered (c.250) at Lydda in Palestine, where his alleged tomb is exhibited. His name was early obscured by fable, such as the story of his fight with a dragon to rescue a maiden. Feast day 23 April.

How St George killed the dragon to save the life of a beautiful girl is a well-known legend that has had a significant influence on historical events.

Although it all happened in Libya, it was far-off England that made the hero her patron saint. English warriors adopted St George's name as their rallying call, and the banner of St George used to be carried into battle before the kings of England.

Hardly any facts are known about St George. Even the dates of his birth and of his martyr's death (in C. 303) are the subject of conjecture.

A soldier in the Roman army, and a pagan, George abandoned his military career when, in the pursuit of his duties, he was ordered to imprison converts to the Christian faith. He adopted Christianity and promised henceforth to dedicate his entire life to doing good and to spreading the Christian message wherever he went.

On his arrival in Silene, in Libya, he was told of a fearsome dragon that was terrorizing the city by demanding a daily offering of two sheep. When the town ran out of animals, the monster insisted on a human sacrifice in their stead. Sadly, the people submitted, choosing by lot the daily victim.

On the day of George's visit, the king's daughter had been picked. Trembling and sobbing, the beautiful girl awaited the gruesome fate of being devoured by the beast. George fearlessly confronted the dragon. He badly wounded it with his lance and then used the princess' belt to lead the now powerless creature into the city!

After returning the girl to her royal father, he killed the dragon. He explained to the king and the people that his Christian faith had given him the supernatural strength needed to achieve the feat. As a result, the entire population, of well over 15,000 people, converted to Christianity.

George then continued on his travels till he was beheaded at the order of the Roman emperor Diocletian, at Lydda in Palestine on 23 April. His martyrdom was in punishment for having reprimanded Diocletian for his cruel and inhumane acts.

The story of George's life and heroic deeds grew in the telling. People were convinced, moreover, that, as well as his fabled exploits, he had performed many other good works that were "known only to God."

English Crusaders first heard of St George, his feats and his fate while they were in the Holy Land. Greatly inspired, they carried his story home to England, where it was soon to capture the imagination of their countrymen. The English came to feel St George's presence in their midst, so much so that eventually they made him their patron saint.

Mystery still surrounds the details of his adoption for this role. Officially, St George became England's patron saint during the reign of King Edward III when, in C. 1348, he founded the famous Most Noble Order of the Garter and placed it under the Saint's patronage. St George's badge - a red cross on white background - became the symbol of England. It was emblazoned on the standards of the army and on the English flag, and the date of his death was celebrated as St George's Day.

By a strange coincidence, Shakespeare, England's greatest dramatist, is believed to have been born (in 1564), and to have died (in 1616), on St George's Day.