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STEPHEN KING

THE EYES OF THE
DRAGON

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STEPHEN KING

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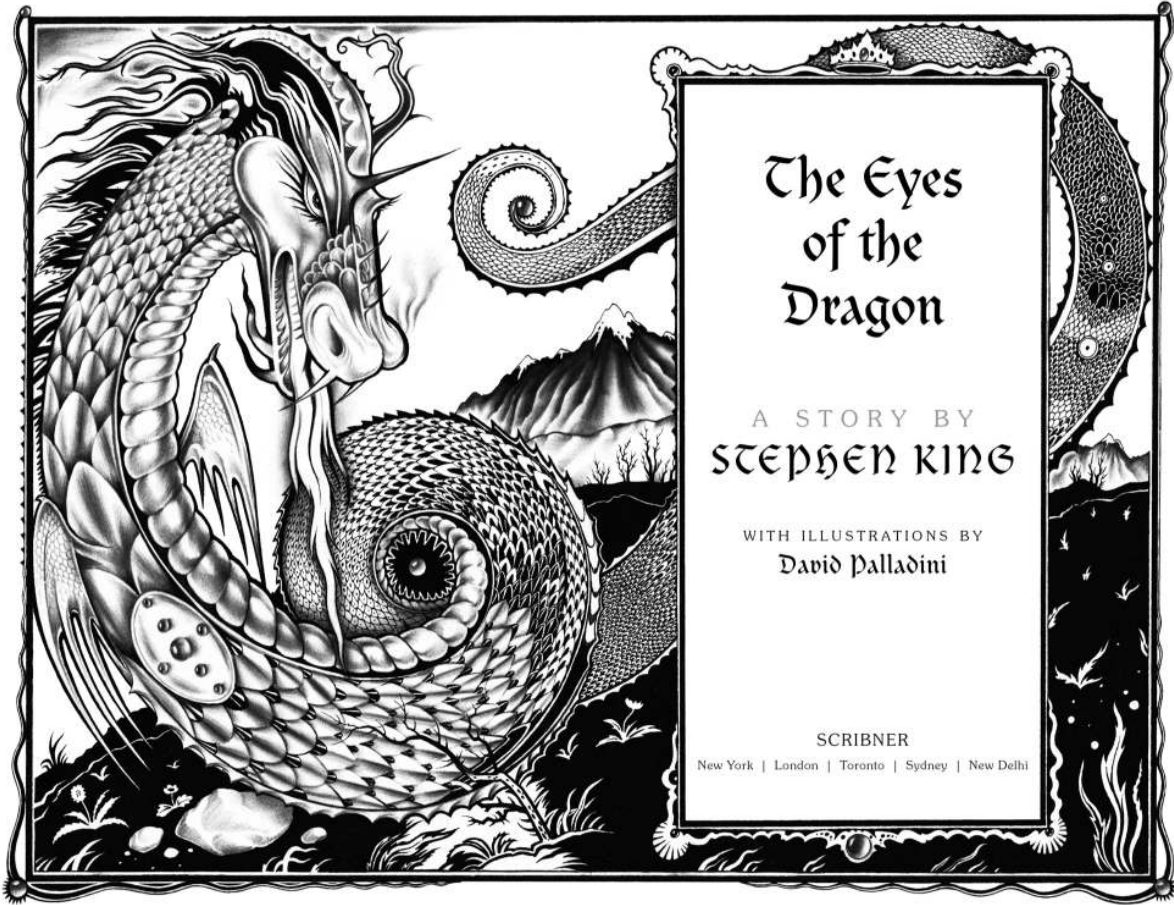
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The Eyes of the Dragon

A STORY BY
STEPHEN KING

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
David Palladini

SCRIBNER

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This story is for my great friend BEN STRAUB, and for
my daughter, NAOMI KING.



1

Once, in a kingdom called Delain, there was a King with two sons. Delain was a very old kingdom and it had had hundreds of Kings, perhaps even thousands; when time goes on long enough, not even historians can remember everything. Roland the Good was neither the best nor the worst King ever to rule the land. He tried very hard not to do anyone great evil and mostly succeeded. He also tried very hard to do great works, but, unfortunately, he didn't succeed so well at that. The result was a very mediocre King; he doubted if he would be remembered long after he was dead. And his death might come at any time now, because he had grown old, and his heart was failing. He had perhaps one year left, perhaps three. Everyone who knew him, and everyone who observed his gray face and shaking hands when he held court, agreed that in five years at the very most a new King would be crowned in the great plaza at the foot of the Needle . . . and it would only be five years with God's grace. So everyone in the Kingdom, from the richest baron and the most foppishly dressed courtier to the poorest serf and his ragged wife, thought and talked about the King in waiting, Roland's elder son, Peter.

And one man thought and planned and brooded on something else: how to make sure that Roland's younger son, Thomas, should be crowned King instead. This man was Flagg, the King's magician.

2

Although Roland the King was old—he admitted to seventy years but was surely older than that—his sons were young. He had been allowed to marry late because he had met no woman who pleased his fancy, and because his mother, the great Dowager Queen of Delain, had seemed immortal to Roland and to everyone else—and that included her. She had ruled the Kingdom for almost fifty years when, one day at tea, she put a freshly cut lemon in her mouth to ease a troublesome cough that had been plaguing her for a week or better. At that particular teatime, a juggler had been performing for the amusement of the Dowager Queen and her court. He was juggling five cunningly made crystal balls. Just as the Queen put the slice of lemon into her mouth, the juggler dropped one of his glass spheres. It shattered on the tiled floor of the great East Court-room with a loud report. The Dowager Queen gasped at the sound. When she gasped, she pulled the lemon slice down her throat and choked to death very quickly. Four days later, the coronation of Roland was held in the Plaza of the Needle. The juggler did not see it; he had been beheaded on the executioner's block behind the Needle three days before that.

A King without heirs makes everybody nervous, especially when the King is fifty and balding. It was thus in Roland's best interest to marry soon, and to make an heir soon. His close advisor, Flagg, made Roland very aware of this. He also pointed out that at fifty, the years left to him in which he could hope to create a child in a woman's belly were only a few. Flagg advised him to take a wife soon, and never mind waiting for a lady of noble birth who would take his fancy. If such a lady had not come into view by the time a man was fifty, Flagg pointed out, she probably never would.

Roland saw the wisdom of this and agreed, never knowing that Flagg, with his lank hair and his white face that was almost always hidden behind a hood, understood his deepest secret: that he had never met the woman of his fancy because he had never really fancied women at all. Women worried him. And he had never fancied the act that puts babies in the bellies of women. That act worried him, too.

But he saw the wisdom of the magician's advice, and six months after the Dowager Queen's funeral, there was a much happier event in the Kingdom—the marriage of King Roland to Sasha, who would become the mother of Peter and Thomas.

Roland was neither loved nor hated in Delain. Sasha, however, was loved by all. When she died giving birth to the second son, the Kingdom was plunged into darkest mourning that lasted a year and a day. She had been one of six women Flagg had suggested to his King as possible brides. Roland had known none of these women, who were all similar in birth and station. They were all of noble blood but none of royal blood; all were meek and pleasant and quiet. Flagg suggested no one who might take his place as the mouth closest to the King's ear. Roland chose Sasha because she seemed the quietest and meekest of the half dozen, and the least likely to frighten him. So they were wed. Sasha of the Western Barony (a very small barony indeed) was then seventeen years old, thirty-three years younger than her husband. She had never seen a man with his drawers off before her wedding night. When, on that occasion, she observed his flaccid penis, she asked with great interest: "What's that, Husband?" If she had said anything else, or if she had said what she said in a slightly different tone of voice, the events of that night—and this entire history—might have taken another course; in spite of the special drink Flagg had given him an hour before, at the end of the wedding feast, Roland might simply have slunk away. But he saw her then exactly as she was—a very young girl who knew even less about the baby-making act than he did—and observed her mouth was kind, and began to love her, as everyone in Delain would grow to love her.

"It is King's Iron," he said.

"It doesn't look like iron," said Sasha, doubtfully.

"It is before the forge," he said.

“Ah!” said she. “And where is the forge?”

“If you will trust me,” said he, getting into bed with her, “I will show you, for you have brought it from the Western Barony with you but did not know it.”

3

The people of Delain loved her because she was kind and good. It was Queen Sasha who created the Great Hospital, Queen Sasha who wept so over the cruelty of the bearbaiting in the Plaza that King Roland finally outlawed the practice, Queen Sasha who pleaded for a Remission of King's Taxes in the year of the great drought, when even the leaves of the Great Old Tree went gray. Did Flagg plot against her, you might ask? Not at first. These were relatively small things in his view, because he was a real magician, and had lived hundreds and hundreds of years.

He even allowed the Remission of Taxes to pass, because the year before, Delain's navy had smashed the Anduan pirates, who had plagued the Kingdom's southern coast for over a hundred years. The skull of the Anduan pirate-king grinned from a spike outside the palace walls and Delain's treasury was rich with recovered plunder. In larger matters, matters of state, it was still Flagg's mouth which was closest to King Roland's ear, and so Flagg was at first content.