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Up the Rhine

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The Knight and the dragon

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THE
KNIGHT AND THE DRAGON.

In the famous old times,
(Famed for chivalrous crimes)
As the legends of Rheinland deliver,
Once there flourish'd a Knight,
Who Sir Otto was hight,
On the banks of the rapid green river!

On the Drachenfels' crest
He had built a stone nest,
From the which he pounced down like a vulture,
And with talons of steel,
Out of every man's meal
Took a very extortionate multure.

Yet he lived in good fame,
With a nobleman's name,
As "Your High-and-Well Born" address'd daily—
Tho' Judge Park in his wig,
Would have deem'd him a prig,
Or a cracksman, if tried at th' Old Bailey.

It is strange—very strange!
How opinions will change!—
How Antiquity blazons and hallows
Both the man and the crime
That a less lapse of time
Would commend to the hulks or the gallows!

Thus enthrall'd by Romance,
In a mystified trance,
E'en a young mild and merciful Woman
Will recal with delight
The wild Keep, and its Knight,
Who was quite as much Tiger as Human!



Now it chanced on a day,
In the sweet month of May,
From his casement Sir Otto was gazing,
With his sword in the sheath,
At that prospect beneath,
Which our Tourists declare so amazing !

Yes—he gazed on the Rhine,
And its banks, so divine ;
Yet with no admiration or wonder,
But the goût of a thief,
As a more modern Chief
Look'd on London, and cried “ What a plunder ! ”

From that river so fast,
From that champaign so vast,
He collected rare tribute and presents ;
Water-rates from ships' loads,
Highway-rates on the roads,
And hard Poor-rates from all the poor Peasants !

When behold ! round the base
Of his strong dwelling-place,
Only gain'd by most toilsome progression,
He perceived a full score
Of the rustics, or more,
Winding up in a sort of procession !

“ Keep them out ! ” the Knight cried,
To the Warders outside—
But the Hound at his feet gave a grumble ;
And in scrambled the knaves,
Like Feudality’s slaves,
With all forms that are servile and humble.

“ Now for boorish complaints !
Grant me patience, ye Saints ! ”
Cried the Knight, turning red as a mullet ;
When the baldest old man
Thus his story began,
With a guttural croak in his gullet !

“ Lord Supreme of our lives,
Of our daughters, our wives,
Our she-cousins, our sons, and their spouses,
Of our sisters and aunts,
Of the babies God grants,
Of the handmaids that dwell in our houses !

“ Mighty master of all
We possess, great or small,
Of our cattle, our sows, and their farrows ;
Of our mares and their colts,
Of our crofts, and our holts,
Of our ploughs, of our wains, and our harrows !

“ Noble Lord of the soil,
Of its corn, and its oil,
Of its wine, only fit for such gentles !
Of our carp and sour-kraut,
Of our carp and our trout
Our black bread, and black puddings, and lentils !

“ Sovran Lord of our cheese,
And whatever you please—
Of our bacon, our eggs, and our butter,
Of our backs and our polls,
Of our bodies and souls—
O give ear to the woes that we utter !

“ We are truly perplex'd,
We are frighted and vex'd,
Till the strings of our heart are all twisted ;
We are ruin'd and curst,
By the fiercest and worst
Of all Robbers that ever existed !”

“ Now by Heav'n and this light !”
In a rage cried the Knight,
“ For this speech all your bodies shall stiffen !
What ! by Peasants miscall'd !”
Quoth the man that was bald,
“ Not your Honour, we mean, but a Griffin.

“ For our herds and our flocks,
He lays wait in the rocks ;
And jumps forth without giving us warning ;
Two poor wethers, right fat,
And four lambs after that,
Did he swallow this very May morning !

Then the High-and-Well-Born
Gave a laugh as in scorn,
“ Is the Griffin indeed such a glutton ?
Let him eat up the rams,
And the lambs, and their dams—
If I hate any meat it is mutton !”

“ Nay, your Worship,” said then
The most bald of old men,
“ For a sheep we should hardly thus cavil ;
If the merciless Beast
Did not oftentimes feast
On the Pilgrims, and people that travel.”

“ Feast on what ?” cried the Knight,
Whilst his eye glisten'd bright
With the most diabolical flashes—
“ Does the Beast dare to prey
On the road and high-way ?
With our proper diversion that clashes !”

“ Yea, 'tis so, and far worse,”
Said the Clown, “ to our curse ;
For by way of a snack or a tiffin,
Every week in the year,
Sure as Sundays appear,
A young Virgin is thrown to the Griffin !”

“ Ha ! Saint Peter ! Saint Mark !”
Roar'd the Knight, frowning dark,
With an oath that was awful and bitter—
“ A young Maid to his dish !
Why, what more could he wish,
If the Beast were High Born, and a Ritter !

“ Now by this our good brand,
And by this our right hand,
By the badge that is borne on our banners,
If we can but once meet
With the Monster's retreat,
We will teach him to poach on our Manors !”

Quite content with this vow,
With a scrape and a bow,
The glad Peasants went home to their flagons,
Where they tippled so deep,
That each clown in his sleep
Dreamt of killing a legion of Dragons !

Thus engaged the bold Knight
Soon prepared for the fight
With the wily and scaly marauder ;
But ere battle began,
Like a good Christian man,
First he put all his household in order.

“ Double bolted and barr'd
Let each gate have a guard”—
(Thus his rugged Lieutenant was bidden)
“ And be sure, without fault,
No one enters the vault
Where the Church's gold vessels are hidden.

“ In the dark Oubliette,
Let yon Merchant forget
That he e'er had a bark richly laden—
And that desperate youth,
Our own rival forsooth !
Just indulge with a Kiss of the Maiden !

“ Crush the thumbs of the Jew
With the vice and the screw,
Till he tells where he buried his treasure ;
And deliver our word
To yon sullen caged Bird,
That to-night she must sing for our pleasure !”

Thereupon, cap-a-pee,
As a Champion should be,
With the bald-headed Peasant to guide him,
On his War-horse he bounds,
And then, whistling his hounds,
Prances off to what fate may betide him!

Nor too long do they seek,
Ere a horrible reek,
Like the fumes from some villanous tavern,
Sets the dogs on the snuff,
For they scent well enough,
The foul Monster coil'd up in his cavern!

Then alighting with speed
From his terrified steed,
Which he ties to a tree for the present,
With his sword ready drawn,
Strides the Ritter High-born,
And along with him drags the scared Peasant.

“ O Sir Knight, good Sir Knight!
I am near enough quite—
I have shown you the Beast and his grotto :”—
But before he can reach
Any farther in speech,
He is stricken stone-dead by Sir Otto!

Who withdrawing himself
To a high rocky shelf,
Sees the Monster his tail disentangle
From each tortuous coil,
With a sudden turmoil,
And rush forth the dead Peasant to mangle.

With his terrible claws,
And his horrible jaws,
He soon moulds the warm corse to a jelly ;
Which he quickly sucks in
To his own wicked skin,
And then sinks at full stretch on his belly.

Then the Knight softly goes,
On the tips of his toes,
To the greedy and slumbering Savage,
And with one hearty stroke
Of his sword, and a poke,
Kills the Beast that had made such a ravage.

So, extended at length,
Without motion or strength,
That gorged Serpent they call the Constrictor,
After dinner, while deep
In lethargical sleep,
Falls a prey to his Hottentot victor.

“ ’Twas too easy by half !”
Said the Knight with a laugh ;
“ But as nobody witness’d the slaughter,
I will swear, knock and knock,
By Saint Winifred’s clock,
We were at it three hours and a quarter !”

Then he chopt off the head
Of the Monster, so dread,
Which he tied to his horse as a trophy ;
And, with Hounds, by the same
Ragged path that he came,
Home he jogg’d proud as Sultan or Sophy !

Blessed Saints ! what a rout
When the news flew about,
And the carcase was fetch’d in a waggon !
What an outcry rose wild
From man, woman, and child—
“ Live Sir Otto, who vanquish’d the Dragon !”

All that night the thick walls
Of the Knight’s feudal halls
Rang with shouts for the wine-cup and flagon ;
Whilst the Vassals stood by,
And repeated the cry—
“ Live Sir Otto, who vanquish’d the Dragon !”

The next night, and the next,
Still the fight was the text,
'Twas a theme for the Minstrels to brag on!
And the Vassals' hoarse throats
Still re-echoed the notes—
“ Live Sir Otto who vanquish'd the Dragon !”

There was never such work
Since the days of King Stork,
When he lived with the Frogs at free quarters!
Not to name the invites
That were sent down of-nights,
To the villagers' wives and their daughters !

It was feast upon feast,
For good cheer never ceased,
And a foray replenished the flagon ;
And the Vassals stood by,
But more weak was the cry—
“ Live Sir Otto, who vanquish'd the Dragon !”

Down again sank the sun,
Nor were revels yet done—
But as ev'ry mouth had a gag on,
Tho' the Vassals stood round,
Deuce a word or a sound
Of “ Sir Otto, who vanquish'd the Dragon !”

There was feasting aloft,
But, thro' pillage so oft,
Down below there was wailing and hunger ;
And affection ran cold ;
And the food of the old,
It was wolfishly snatch'd by the younger !

Mad with troubles so vast,
Where's the wonder at last
If the Peasants quite alter'd their motto ?—
And with one loud accord
Cried out " Would to the Lord
That the Dragon had vanquish'd Sir Otto !"