


LAST ADVENTURE.

Siegfried's Fight with the Dragon.

IEGFRIED was now desirous to try the sharpness of his sword, and it glided through the Dragon's shield like water and went deep into the rock. All were full of joy when they saw this; but the wise Dwarf alone looked grave and said, "Thou hast a harder battle still to fight, and thou requirest meat and drink to refresh thee for it." Then he blew his little silver horn, and at its shrill sound there came forth from the crevices of the rocks Dwarfs, white and grey. Then they spread a carpet and brought meat and drink of all kinds, and Siegfried sat down and ate, and the maiden offered him a golden drinking-horn, saying, "Hail to the hero of the Netherlands! hail to the bold son of Siegmund! hail to the fighter with the Dragon, Siegfried!" The hero drained the cup and said, "Truly never did I feel so inspired with courage, and never longed for the chase of the boar in my father's forests as I now do for the contest with this hideous Dragon, the keeper of the treasure of the Nibelungen. If my forefathers stood here in a circle, as they stand around the walls of our halls at home, they would indeed rejoice in the contest, for the sound of my sword shall re-echo far around, and

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gladden the heart of many a hero. Come what may, I dread none on earth, and I stand here on this stone, armed and prepared with this uplifted sword to meet the fight."

As he spoke thus a roaring sound was heard, which vibrated nearer and nearer, as if the mountain were shaken and falling into ruins. Thereupon the maiden was struck with great terror; but the eyes of Siegfried glanced like two flaming swords, and he bade her be of good cheer, saying, "The Author of Light gave us life, and how shall the Dragon of darkness take it away? my sharp and gleaming sword shall dazzle him so that he shall not be able to distinguish the day from the night."

As the evening twilight arose, the Dragon came slowly onwards, hovering like a dark storm-cloud. Siegfried advanced and met him on the edge of the rock. Near him stood his two faithful dogs. The maiden drew back, and the Dwarf put on his cap of mist and crept into a crevice of the rock. Three times did the Dragon fly searching around the stone, for as yet he had not seen the hero. But just as he was about to lie down he perceived Siegfried, and sending forth furiously blue flames, he lashed the earth with his tail. In a moment the hero's shield was covered with blue flame, and became glowing hot; his dogs were about to fly at the monster, but they fell dead to the earth at his first breath. The poisonous flames darted more and more fearfully on Siegfried; and to cool himself he was forced to withdraw into the vaulted gallery of

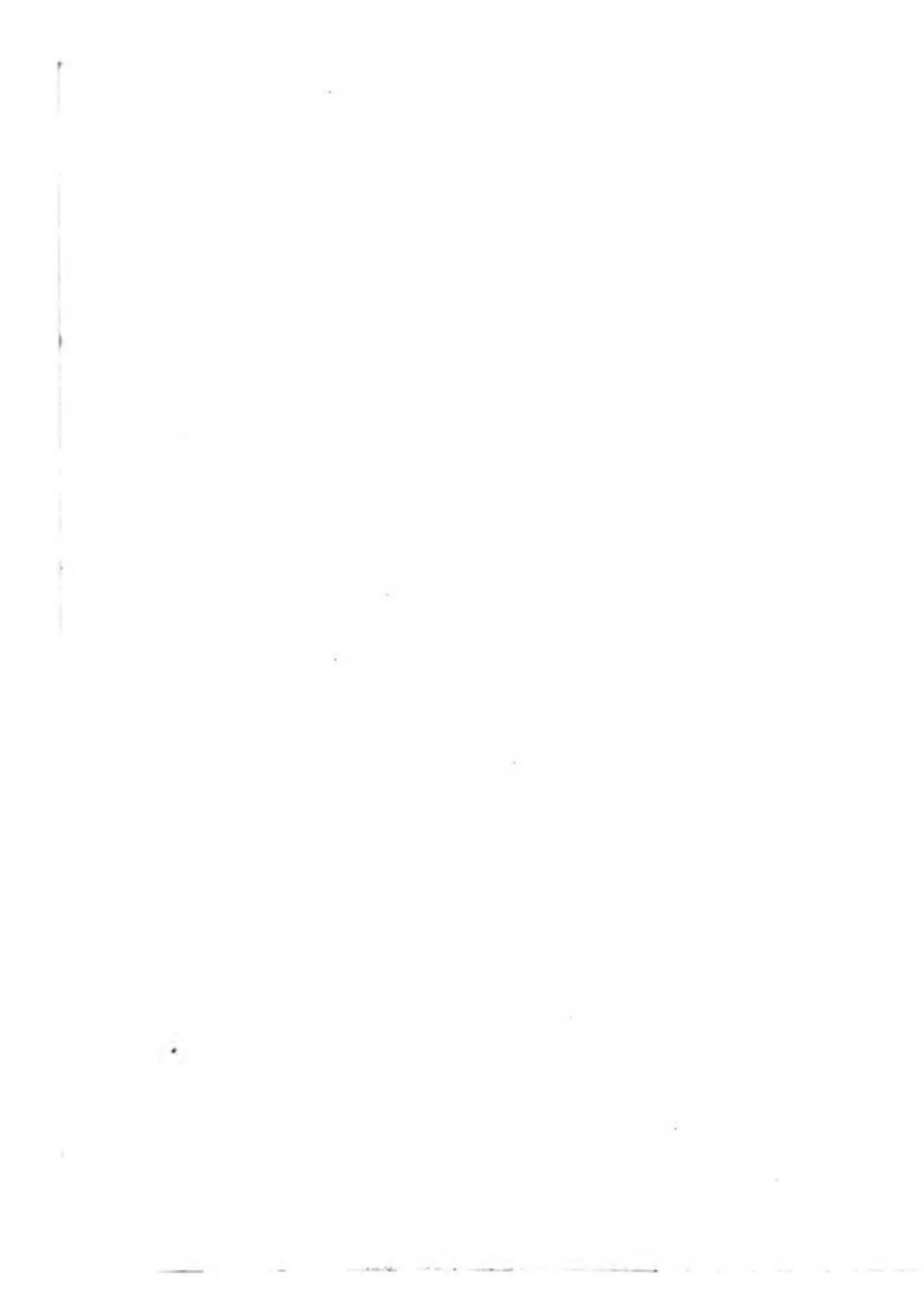
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the mountain. Thither the Dragon could not follow him, for the passage was too narrow; so he remained spouting forth fire at the entrance, and knew not how to get in; nor did Siegfried know how he should reach the Dragon with his good sword. In this difficulty he looked around and saw lying near him a huge stone, which ten men could not have lifted. Remembering his great ancestors, he seized it, and threw it in the gaping throat of the pestiferous monster; and now the flames being quenched, he darted with sword and shield upon the Dragon, and dealt him blow after blow upon the head.

But the blows of Siegfried's sword at first produced no effect, the scales were hard as diamonds, and the sword flew back. On a sudden, as he was striking with all his might, he heard a plaintive tone, which seemed like the voice of the Dwarf, as if calling for help from the Dragon's jaws. And so it was; for the Dwarf had seated himself, under his invisible cap of mist, upon the stone which Siegfried had thrown into the Dragon's mouth, and he now called out in terror lest Siegfried should kill him.

When the Dragon heard the cry of the invisible Dwarf he turned round; but at that moment Siegfried dealt him a heavy blow on his neck, at the point where the scales were a little parted. The sword struck into the neck, and the pent-up flames burst through the wound at the side, so that Siegfried was now safe from them. The little Dwarf crept quickly out of the wound. The Dragon raved still more with the





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pain; he fell on Siegfried, snatched his shield, and snapping it like a lath he flew at the hero's head. But Siegfried too was now fired with rage, and grasping his sword firmly struck off the monster's right claw. Thereupon the Dragon roared with fury, swung his tail around, and strove to entwine the hero in its folds. But Siegfried at a bound leaped high above the tail, and now ran with such force against the monster that he threw him backward on the ground; then seizing his sword with both hands, with the first blow he drove it two spans deep into his breast, at the second he cut his heart through and through, so that the sword sank deep into the stone; and as he was about to give a third blow, he himself fell senseless beside the monster, which in the death-struggle was consumed in its own fire.

Such was the great fight with the black, poisonous Dragon, who guarded the treasure of the ancient curse, by which the hero of the Low Countries acquired fame and glory above that of all his fathers. The deeds he wrought with his sharp sword at the Drachenstein have resounded for centuries from north to south in many an heroic lay by the ancient minstrels; nor can the name of Siegfried the Dragon-slayer ever pass away as long as German song is sung.

Pale as death lay the exhausted hero for a long time; then he fetched a deep breath, and slowly opened his eyes. But how great was his sorrow when he saw lying near him the King's daughter, pale and motionless as a corpse. He sprang

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up, took her in his arms, called on her by name ; but she awoke not, nor gave any signs of life. The hero began to lament aloud his misfortune, when at length Euglein the Dwarf came stealing by. He looked about on all sides, and was overjoyed when he saw that Siegfried had slain the Dragon. He immediately went to the virgin, took a root from his girdle, and with its scent awoke her to new life. The joy of Siegfried was only equalled by that of the beautiful daughter of the Rhine King ; and Euglein too was so delighted at their deliverance from the Dragon, that he begged the hero to claim from him whatever he liked, gold or diamonds, costly ornaments or weapons, for all were at his command. Siegfried thanked him for his offer, but said that his deliverance of the maiden was reward enough for him ; if however he desired to do him a favour, he would ask him, who was so well informed of the future, to tell him his destiny. The Dwarf immediately placed his bright gleaming shield on a table of stone, and held a handful of dry grass to the sun, which forthwith burst into a flame : then he strewed a precious perfume over the shield. A singular odour diffused itself around, but the Dwarf inhaled the vapour, his eyes closed, and turning a costly ring on his finger, began, as if in a deep slumber, to pronounce the following invocation :—

“ As the falcon in its motion
Flies in circles round and round,

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Seeking both o'er land and ocean
Where its prey may best be found ;

“ So the venerable sage,
Turning still his magic ring,
Sees through many a coming age
Many a dim and distant thing.”

On this he ceased awhile, then pointed with his finger to the south, then to the right and left, as if forms surrounded him on every side, and then announced the marriage of Siegfried with Kriemhilda thus :

“ Rosy gardens on the Rhine,
Meadows full of bright sunshine,
Through which wander streamlets fair,
Stags and roebucks pair and pair,
Foliage, with the feather'd throng
Warbling wild the woods among ;
While a silken thread incloses
All this fairy bow'r of roses.
Many a knight, with martial tramp,
Watches round that forest camp ;
From the branches, from the trees
Pennons wanton in the breeze.
Round the throne so fair to see,
All of gold and ivory.

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“ Ladies look on scenes so fair,
Brave knights look on ladies there ;
One his proud compeers outvies,
Like the sun in yonder skies ;
Like the moon in modest pride,
One sweet maiden is his bride ;
For to her that hero-youth
Gives a ring in pledge of truth.
All the maidens softly sigh,
All the youthful heroes cry,
Hail to Siegfried and his prize,
This, O this, is Paradise !

“ But an evil dame is nigh,
Malice in her heart and eye,
And she brings that bride so fair
Three young rosebuds sweet and rare,
Take the purest of the three,
Take, she cries, 'tis meant for thee !
But beware, sweet bride, beware,
For a thorn is lurking there ;
See, it wounds thy finger fair.
Bride, why stops thy sobbing breath ?
Bride, why art thou pale as death ?”

The Dwarf was silent for awhile, and then turning towards the west began to sing thus of Siegfried's death :

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“ Hunter’s horn and hunter’s song,
Wolves and bears together throng,
Through the wild wood runs the boar,
Hounds that follow bark and roar.

“ Foxes creep in corners fly,
Birds are twitt’ring in the sky,
Two white does in flight are seen,
And a stag in clover green.

“ Hark ! a sound of hunter’s horn,
By the breezes hither borne,
Through the deep wood’s dark defiles,
Where the sunbeam never smiles.

“ Hark ! three dismal ravens croak
On a dry and wither’d oak,
And their dark foreboding song
Tells a tale of death and wrong.

“ And the streamlet’s gentle flood
Flows with warm and vital blood :
Stretch’d upon the flowery heath,
See, a hero sleeps in death !

“ Howling wild his faithful hound
Licks in vain his deadly wound ;
While his falcon from his breast
Drives the ravens to their nest.

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“ See, his stainless sword and shield
Lie unused upon the field ;
He hath never seen his foe,
Treach’ry laid the hero low.

“ In his halls two women fair
Sit in fierce defiance there,
Frowning darkly each at each,
Deigning not a word of speech.

“ Hastening from the neighb’ring wood
Come two knights, all stain’d with blood :
Of the women, one is glad,
But the other pale and fad.

“ One has drain’d a cup of gold,
Sinks the other pale and cold :
One the thought of rage inspires,
But revenge the other fires !”

Finally the Dwarf turned towards the north and sang with
a hollow voice the revenge of Chriemhilda :

“ Heroes feast within a palace,
Guests all wear the festive wreath ;
But their mirth is changed to malice,
And their dance to a dance of death.

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“ Shrieks of horror, shrieks of anger,
Tell the fury of their strife;
Answering fierce the trumpet's clangour,
Stern demanding life for life.

“ Sword and shield in strife are meeting,
Steel and iron sternly strive,
And of guests that late were greeting,
Few shall quit the spot alive.

“ In that hall of strife and treason
Many a bravest knight must yield;
Like the sheaves in harvest season
Corpses strew that fatal field.

“ But in death their hate is banish'd,
Foemen fall beside their foe,
And their hatred hath but vanish'd
Now that death hath laid them low.

“ Wand'ring where the dead are lying,
Say, what mystic form appears
Mid the wounded and the dying,—
'Tis a woman bathed in tears.

“ Fire has seized the hall around her,
While its vapours choke her breath,
She exclaims, while flames surround her,
We have died for Siegfried's death!”

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Thus sang the Dwarf of the fate of future days. Siegfried and the maiden were deeply affected by the serious tone of his song. Although they had not understood all that he said, yet they perceived that bleeding forms looked through the mist that surrounded the whole, and that these were lighted rather by fierce and fatal lightning than by the gentle rays of sunshine and peace. When the Dwarf had ended, he took his leave, saying that he must descend deep into the mountain, whither his Dwarfs had fled, anxious for the result of the contest; for he would bring them the glad intelligence of victory. Then he bade the hero farewell, and promised, if he should require his aid, to assist him with all his power and all his wealth; adding, that he would find two horses ready for mounting at the mouth of the cave. Siegfried thanked him, and the Dwarf disappeared in a crevice of the rock.

The hero and the King's daughter rested for awhile on the summit of the Drachenstein, and looked at the far distance, over the lofty wooded tops of the mountains, over the green plains and vales, the barren heaths and silver streams. Then they examined everything in the cave, and came to the Dragon's couch, which he had made of the skins of lions. Siegfried lifted up the skins, and a dazzling light burst upon his sight, and the treasure and the ring lay before him. But he forgot the warning voice of the Dwarf, concerning the ancient curse which lay on the gold of the Nibelungen: he took the treasure of discord and envy, and hence at a later period the words of

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Euglein came to be fulfilled, and he and his whole race were annihilated by fire and sword, like those who had possessed it before. The treasure however was cast into the Rhine, where it may rest until a holy hand shall find it, over which the curse has no power.

Here, however, ends this tradition: and its sequel has been said and sung in other songs and legends, in which, reader, thou mayest hear how Siegfried celebrated in the Rose-garden of Worms his marriage with Chriemhilda, how he gloriously contended in seven conflicts, winning heroic fame, and how he was slain in the forest by the cruel Hagen at the instigation of Brunhilda, but was fatally avenged by Chriemhilda on the Giants, their brothers and relations.

But the good town of Worms, where Siegfried celebrated his marriage and where he was treacherously slain, honoured his memory by a praiseworthy custom for centuries after, out of gratitude for its deliverance from the cruel Dragon. When a minstrel sang his deeds publicly before all the people in such a manner that the judges appointed could find no fault, a piece of gold was awarded him by the council of the city. In our poor times this ancient custom no longer exists; but in former days, the city caused the figures of Siegfried and the ancient race of kings to be painted in different places, at the council-house, at the Mainz-gate, at the new tower, and at the mint, where the bones of the Dragon hung in chains of iron. Siegfried's spear was preserved, and the Rose-garden is still shown;

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and when, in 1488, the Emperor Frederick the Third was at Worms, he ordered the bones of the hero to be sought for in the churchyard, but nothing was discovered. Certain it is however, that up to the present day the armorial bearing of Worms is the Giant's key which locked up the stone, and the supporter the fiery Dragon whom Siegfried slew, and that his memory lives in the songs of many a minstrel and in the hearts of the people.



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