



The Dragon's Tail

Brothers Grimm

German

Intermediate

22 min read

I wonder if the girls and boys who read these stories, have heard of the charming and romantic town of Eisenach? I suppose not, for it is a curious fact that few English people visit the place, though very many Americans go there. Americans are well known to have a special interest in old places with historical associations, because they have nothing of the sort in America; moreover many of them are Germans by birth, and have heard stories of the Wartburg, that beautiful old castle, which from the summit of a hill, surrounded by woods, overlooks the town of Eisenach.

The Wartburg is quaintly built with dear little turrets and gables, and high towers, a long curving wall with dark beams like the peasant cottages, and windows looking out into the forest. It belongs at present to the Grand duke of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach.

Every stone and corner of the Wartburg is connected with some old story or legend.

For instance there is the hall with the raised dais at one end and beautiful pillars supporting the roof where minnesingers of old times used to hold their great "musical festivals" as we should say nowadays. There was keen competition for the prizes that were offered in reward for the best music and songs.

In the castle are also the rooms of St Elizabeth, that sweet saint who was so good to the poor, and who suffered so terribly herself in parting from her husband and children.

Then there is the lion on the roof who could tell a fine tale if he chose; the great banqueting hall and the little chapel.

On the top of the tower is a beautiful cross that is lit up at night by electric light and can be seen from a great distance in the country round. This is of course a modern addition.

But the most interesting room in the castle is that where Dr Martin Luther spent his time translating the Bible. A reward had been offered to anyone who should kill this arch-heretic; so his friends brought him disguised as a knight to the Wartburg, and very few people knew of his whereabouts.

As you look through the latticed windows of that little room, the exquisite blue and purple hills of the Thüringen-Wald stretch away in the distance, and no human habitation is to be seen. There too you may see the famous spot on the wall where Luther threw the inkpot at the devil. To be correct you can see the hole where the ink-stain used to be; for visitors have cut away every trace of the ink, and even portions of the old wooden bedstead. There is the writing-desk with the translation of the Bible, and the remarkable footstool that consisted of the bone of a mammoth.

Those were the days in which a man risked his life for his faith; but they were the days also, we must remember, of witchcraft and magic.

One other story of the Wartburg I must narrate in order to give you some idea of the interest that still surrounds the place, and influences the children who grow up there. It was in the days of the old Emperor Barbarossa (Redbeard).

The sister of the Emperor whose name was Jutta, was married to the Landgraf Ludwig of Thüringen, and they lived at the Wartburg.

One day when Barbarossa came to visit them, he observed that the castle had no outer walls round it, as was usual in those days.

“What a pity,” he said, “that such a fine castle should be unprotected by walls and ramparts, it ought to be more strongly fortified.”

“Oh,” said Landgraf Ludwig, “if that is all the castle needs, it can soon have them.”

“How soon?” said the Emperor, mockingly.

“In the space of three days,” answered his brother-in-law.

“That could only be possible with the aid of the devil,” said Barbarossa, “otherwise it could not be done.”

“Wait and see for yourself,” said the Landgraf.

On the third day of his visit, Ludwig said to the Emperor: “Would you care to see the walls? They are finished now.”

Barbarossa crossed himself several times, and prepared for some fearful manifestation of black magic; but what was his surprise to see a living wall round the castle of stout peasants and burghers, ready armed, with weapons in their hands; the banners of well-known knights and lords waved their pennants in the wind where battlements should have been.

The Emperor was much astonished, and called out: “Many thanks, brother-in-law, for your lesson; stronger walls I have never seen, nor better fitted together.”

“Rough stones they may some of them be,” said the Landgraf, “yet I can rely on them, as you see.”

Now as you may imagine, the children who grow up in this town, must have their heads full of these tales, and many poets and artists have been inspired by the beauties of Eisenach. The natural surroundings of the town are so wonderful, that they also provide rich material for the imagination.

Helmut was a boy who lived in Eisenach. He was eight years old, and went to a day school. He lived outside the town, not far from the entrance to the forest. He was a pale, fair-haired little boy, and did not look the tremendous hero he fancied himself in his dreams; not even when he buckled on helmet, breast-plate and sword, and marched out into the street to take his part in the warfare that went on constantly there, between the boys of this neighbourhood, and the boys who belonged to another part of the town.

Now the Dragon’s Gorge is a most marvellous place; it is surrounded on all sides by thick forests, and you come on it suddenly when walking in the woods. It is a group of huge green rocks like cliffs that stand picturesquely piled close together, towering up to the sky. There is only a very narrow pathway between them.

Helmut had often been there with his father and mother or with other boys. After heavy rain or thawing snow

it became impassable; at the best of times it was advisable for a lady not to put on her Sunday hat, especially if it were large and had feathers; for the rocks are constantly dripping with water. The great boulders are covered with green moss or tiny ferns; and in the spring time, wood sorrel grows on them in great patches, the under side of the leaves tinged an exquisite violet or pink colour. The entrance to the Dragon's Gorge is through these rocks; they narrow and almost meet overhead, obscuring the sky, till it seems as if one were walking under the sea. Two persons cannot walk side by side here. In some parts, indeed, one can only just squeeze through; the way winds in and out in the most curious manner; there are little side passages too, that you could hardly get into at all.

In some places you can hear the water roaring under your feet; then the rocks end abruptly and you come out into the forest again, and hear the birds singing and see the little brook dancing along by the side of the way. Altogether it is the most fascinating, wet and delightful walk that you could imagine.

Helmut had long been planning an expedition to these rocks in company with other boy friends, in order to slay the dragon. He dreamt of it day and night, until he brought home a bad mark for "attention" in his school report. He told his mother about it; she laughed and said he might leave the poor old fellow alone; there were plenty of dragons to slay at home, self-will, disobedience, inattention, and so on! She made a momentary impression on the little boy, who always wanted to be good but found it difficult at times, curious to say, to carry out his intention.

He looked thoughtful and answered: "Of course, mother, I know; but this time I want to slay a 'really and truly' dragon, may I? Will you let me go with the other boys, it would be such fun?"

The Dragon's Gorge was not far off, and mother did not think that Helmut could do himself any harm, except by getting wet and dirty, and that he might do as well in the garden at home.

"If you put on your old suit and your thick boots, I think you may go. Keep with the other boys and promise me not to get lost!"

"Oh, I say, won't it be fine fun! I'll run off and tell the other fellows. Hurrah!" and Helmut ran off into the street. Soon four heads were to be seen close together making plans for the next day.

"We'll start quite early at six o'clock," they said, "and take our second breakfast with us." (In Germany eleven o'clock lunch is called second breakfast.) However it was seven o'clock a.m. before the boys had had their first

breakfast, and met outside the house.

How mother and father laughed to see the little fellows, all dressed in the most warlike costumes like miniature soldiers, armed with guns and swords.

Mother was a little anxious and hoped they would come to no harm; but she liked her boy to be independent, and knew how happy children are if left to play their pretence games alone. She watched the four set off at a swinging march down the street. Soon they had recruits, for it was a holiday, and there were plenty of boys about.

Helmut was commanding officer; the boys shouldered their guns, or presented arms as he directed. They passed the pond and followed the stream through the woods, until they came to the Dragon's Gorge, where the rocks rise up suddenly high and imposing looking. Here they could only proceed in single file. Helmut headed the band feeling as courageous as in his dreams; his head swam with elation. Huge walls towered above them; the rocks dropped water on their heads. As yet they had seen or heard nothing of the dragon. Yet as they held their breath to listen, they could hear something roaring under their feet.

"Don't you tell me that that is only water," said Helmut, "A little brook can't make such a row as that—that's the dragon."

The other boys laughed, they were sceptical as to the dragon, and were only pretending, whereas Helmut was in earnest.

"I'm hungry," said one boy, "supposing we find a dry place and have our lunch!"

They came to where the path wound out again into the open air, and sat down on some stones, which could hardly be described as dry. Here they ate bread and sausage, oranges and bananas.

"Give me the orange peel, you fellows. Mother hates us to throw it about; it makes the place so untidy." So saying Helmut pushed his orange peel right into a crevice of the rock and covered it with old leaves. But the other boys laughed at him, and chucked theirs into the little stream, which made Helmut very angry.

"I won't be your officer any more, if you do not do as I say," he said, and they began to quarrel.

"We're not going to fight your old dragon, we're going home again to play football, that will be far better fun," said the boys who had joined as recruits, and they went off home, till only Helmut's chums were left. They were

glad enough to get rid of the other boys.

“We have more chance of seeing the dragon without those stupid fellows,” they said.

They finished their lunch, shouldered their guns again, and entered the second gorge, which is even more picturesque and narrow than the first.

Suddenly Helmut espied something round, and slimy, and long lying on the path before him like a blind worm, but much thicker than blind worms generally are. He became fearfully excited, “Come along you fellows, hurry up,” he said, “I do believe it is the dragon’s tail!”

They came up close behind him and looked over his shoulders; the gorge was so narrow here that they could not pass one another.

“Good gracious!” they said, “whatever shall we do now?”

They all felt frightened at the idea of a real dragon, but they stood to their guns like men, all but the youngest, Adolf, who wanted to run away home; but the others would not let him.

“Helmut catch hold of it, quick now,” whispered Werner and Wolf, the other two boys.

Helmut stretched out his hand courageously; perhaps it was only a huge, blind worm after all; but as he tried to catch it, the thing slipped swiftly away. They all followed it, running as fast as they could through the narrow gorge, bumping themselves against the walls, scratching themselves and tearing their clothes, but all the time Helmut never let that tail (if it was a tail) out of his sight.

“If we had some salt to put on it,” said he, “we might catch it like a dicky bird.”

“It would be a fine thing to present to a museum,” said Wolf.

Well, that thing led them a fine dance. It would stop short, and then when they thought they had got it, it started off again, until they were all puffing and blowing.

“We’ve got to catch it somehow,” said Helmut, who thought the chase fine sport. At that moment the gorge opened out again into the woods, and the tail gave them the slip; for it disappeared in a crevice of the rock where there was no room for a boy to follow it.

“It was a blind worm you see,” said Werner.

Presently, however, they heard a noise as of thunder, and looking down the path they saw a head glaring at them out of the rocks, undeniably a dragon’s head, with a huge jaw, red tongue, and rows of jagged teeth.

The boys stared aghast: they were in for an adventure this time, and no mistake. Slowly the dragon raised himself out of the rocks, so that they saw his whole scaly length, like a huge crocodile. Then he began to move along the path away from them. He moved quite slowly now, so there was no difficulty in keeping up with him; but his tail was so slimy and slippery that they could not keep hold of it; moreover it wriggled dreadfully whenever they tried to seize it. But Helmut had inherited the cool courage of the Wartburg knights, and he was not going to be overcome by difficulties.

With a wild Indian whoop he sprang on the dragon’s back, and all the other boys followed his example, except little Adolf who was timid and began to set up a howl for his mother, I’m sorry to say. No sooner were the boys on his back than the dragon set off at a fine trot up and down the Dragon’s Gorge, they had to hold on tight and to duck whenever the rock projected overhead, or when they went sharply round a corner.

“Hurrah,” cried Helmut waving a flag, “this is better than a motor ride. Isn’t he a jolly old fellow?”

At this remark the jolly old fellow stopped dead and began to snort out fire and smoke, that made the boys cough and choke.

“Now stop that, will you!” said Helmut imperatively, “or we shall have to slay you after all, that’s what we came out for you know.” He pointed his gun at the head of the dragon as he spoke like a real hero.

The dragon began to tremble, and though they could only see his profile, they thought he turned pale.

“Where’s that other little boy?” he asked in a hollow voice. “If you will give him to me for my dinner, I will spare you all.”

Helmut laughed scornfully, “Thanks, old fellow,” he said—“you’re very kind, I’m sure Adolf would be much obliged to you. I expect he’s run home to his mother long ago; he’s a bit of a funk, we shan’t take him with us another time.”

“He looked so sweet and juicy and tender,” said the dragon sighing, “I never get a child for dinner nowadays!

Woe is me," he sniffed.

"You are an old cannibal," said the boys horrified, and mistaking the meaning of the word cannibal. "Hurry up now and give us another ride, it's first-rate fun this!"

The dragon groaned and seemed disinclined to stir, but the boys kicked him with their heels, and there was nothing for it but to gee-up.

After he had been up and down several times, and the boys' clothes were nearly torn to pieces, he suddenly turned into a great crevice in the rocks that led down into a dark passage, and the boys felt really frightened for the first time. Daylight has a wonderfully bracing effect on the nerves.

In a moment, however, a few rays of sunshine penetrated the black darkness, and they saw that they were in a small cave. The next thing they experienced was that the dragon shook himself violently, and the small boys fell off his back like apples from a tree on to the wet and sloppy floor. They picked themselves up again in a second, and there they saw the dragon before them, panting after his exertions and filling the cavern with a poisonous-smelling smoke. Helmut and Wolf and Werner stood near the cracks which did the duty of windows, and held their pistols pointed at him. Luckily he was too stupid to know that they were only toy guns, and when they fired them off crack-crack, they soon discovered that he was in a terrible fright.

"What have I done to you, young sirs?" he gasped out. "What have I done to you, that you should want to shoot me? Yet shoot me! yes, destroy me if you will and end my miserable existence!" He began to groan until the cavern reverberated with his cries.

"What's the matter now, old chappie?" said Helmut, who, observing the weakness of the enemy, had regained his courage.

"I am an anachronism," said the dragon, "don't you know what that is?—well, I am one born out of my age. I am a survival of anything but the fittest. You are the masters now, you miserable floppy-looking race of mankind. You can shoot me, you can blow me up with dynamite, you can poison me, you can stuff me—Oh, oh—you can put me into a cage in the Zoological Gardens, you have flying dragons in the sky who could drop on me suddenly and crush me. You have the power. We great creatures of bygone ages have only been able to creep into the rocks and caves to hide from your superior cleverness and your wily machinations. We must perish while you go on like the brook for ever." So saying he began to shed great tears, that dropped on the

floor splash, splash, like the water from the rocks.

The boys felt embarrassed: this was not their idea of manly conduct, and considerably lowered their opinion of dragons in general.

“Do not betray me, young sirs,” went on the dragon in a pathetic and weepy voice, “I have managed so far to lie here concealed though multitudes of people have passed this way and never perceived me.”

“I tell you what,” said Helmut touched by the dragon’s evident terror, “let’s make friends with him, boys; he’s given us a nice ride for nothing; we will present him with the flag of truce.”

Turning to the dragon he said: “Allow us to give you a banana and a roll in token of our friendship and esteem.”

“O,” said the dragon brightening up, “I like bananas. People often throw the skins away here. I prefer them to orange peel. I live on such things, you must know, the cast-off refuse of humanity,” he said, becoming tragic again.

They presented him with the banana, and he ate it skin and all, it seemed to give him an appetite. He appeared to recover his spirits, and the boys thought it would be better to look for the way out. The cavern seemed quite smooth and round, except for the cracks through which the daylight came; they could not discover the passage by which they had entered. The dragon’s eyes were beginning to look bloodthirsty; remembrances of his former strength shot across his dulled brains. He could crush and eat these little boys after all and nobody would be the wiser. Little boys tasted nicer than bananas even.

Meanwhile Wolf and Werner had stuck their flags through the holes in the rocks, so that they were visible from the outside.

Now little Adolf had gone straight home, and had told awful tales of the games the others were up to, and he conducted the four mothers to the Dragon’s Gorge where they wandered up and down looking for their boys. Adolf observed the flags sticking up on the rocks, and drew attention to them. The Dragon’s Gorge resounded with the cries of “Helmut! Wolf! Werner!”

The dragon heard the voices as well; his evil intentions died away; the chronic fear of discovery came upon him again. He grew paler and paler; clouds of smoke came from his nostrils, until he became invisible. At the same moment Helmut groping against the wall that lay in shadow, found the opening of the passage through which

they had come. Through this the three boys now crawled, hardly daring to breathe, for fear of exciting the dragon again. Soon a gleam of light at the other end told of their deliverance. Their tender mothers fell on their necks, and scolded them at the same time. Truly, never did boys look dirtier or more disreputable.

“We feel positively ashamed to go home with you,” their mothers said to them.

“Well, for once I was jolly glad you did come, mother,” said Helmut. “That treacherous old dragon wanted to turn on us after all; he might have devoured us, if you had not turned up in the nick of time. Not that I believe that he really would have done anything of the sort, he was a coward you know, and when we levelled our guns at him he was awfully frightened. Still he might have found out that our guns were not properly loaded, and then it would have been unpleasant.”

Mother smiled, she did not seem to take the story quite so seriously as Helmut wished.

“We had a gorgeous ride on his back, mother dear; would you like to see him? You have only to lie down flat and squeeze yourself through that crack in the rocks till you come to his cave.”

“No thank you,” said mother, “I think I can do without seeing your dragon.”

“Oh, we have forgotten our flags!” called out Wolf and Werner, “wait a minute for us,” and they climbed up over the rocks and rescued the flags. “He’s still in there,” they whispered to Helmut in a mysterious whisper.

“Mother,” said Helmut that evening when she came to wish him good night, “do you know, if you stand up to a dragon like a man, and are not afraid of him, he is not so difficult to vanquish after all.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said mother, “‘Volo cum Deo’—there is a Latin proverb for you; it means, that with God’s help, will-power is the chief thing necessary; this even dragons know. Thus a little boy can conquer even greater dragons than the monsters vast of ages past.”

“Hum!” said Helmut musingly, “mother, dear, I was a real hero to-day, I think you would have been proud of me; but I must confess between ourselves, that the old dragon was a bit of a fool!”

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