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The Pilgrims of the Rhine

Lytton, Edward Bulwer Lytton

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Chapter XI.

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CHAPTER XI.

WHEREIN THE READER IS MADE SPECTATOR WITH THE ENGLISH FAIRIES OF THE
SCENES AND BEINGS THAT ARE BENEATH THE EARTH.

DURING the heat of next day's noon, Fayzenheim took the English visitors through the cool caverns that wind amidst the mountains of the Rhine. There a thousand wonders awaited the eyes of the Fairy Queen. I speak not of the Gothic arch and aisle into which the hollow earth forms itself, or the stream that rushes with a mighty voice through the dark chasm, or the silver columns that shoot aloft, worked by the gnomes from the mines of the mountains of Taunus; but of the strange inhabitants that from time to time they came upon. They found in one solitary cell, lined with dried moss, two misshapen elves, of a larger size than common, with a plebeian working-day aspect, who were chatting noisily together, and making a pair of boots: these were the haus-mannen or domestic elves, that dance into tradesmen's houses of a night, and play all sorts of undignified tricks,—Pucks without his graces. They were very civil to the Queen, for they are good-natured creatures on the whole, and once had many relations in Scotland. They then, follow-

ing the course of a noisy rivulet, came to a hole, from which the sharp head of a fox peeped out. The Queen was frightened. "Oh, come on," said the Fox, encouragingly, "I am one of the fairy race, and many are the gambols we of the brute-elves play in the German world of romance." "Indeed Mr. Fox," said the Prince, "you only speak the truth; and how is Mr. Bruin?" "Quite well, my prince; but tired of his seclusion, for indeed our race can do little or nothing now in the world, and lie here in our old age, telling stories of the past, and recalling the exploits we did in our youth; which, Madam, you may see in all the fairy histories in the Prince's library."

"Your own love adventures, for instance, Master Fox," said the Prince.

The Fox snarled angrily, and drew in his head.

"You have displeased your friend," said Nymphalin.

"Yes—he likes no allusions to the amorous follies of his youth. Did you ever hear of his rivalry with the Dog, for the Cat's good graces?"

"No—that must be very amusing."

"Well, my Queen, when we rest by-and-by, I will relate to you the history of the Fox's wooing."

The next place they came to was a vast Runic cavern, covered with dark inscriptions of a forgotten tongue; and sitting on a huge stone they found a dwarf with long yellow hair, his head leaning on his breast, and absorbed in meditation.

"This is a spirit of a wise and powerful race," whispered

Fayzenheim; "that has often battled with the fairies; but he is of the kindly tribe."

Then the dwarf lifted his head with a mournful air, and gazed upon the bright shapes before him, lighted by the pine torches that the Prince's attendants carried.

"And what dost thou muse upon, O descendant of the race of Laurin?" said the Prince.

"Upon TIME!" answered the dwarf, gloomily. "I see a river, and its waves are black, flowing from the clouds, and none knoweth its source. It rolls deeply on, aye and evermore, through a green valley, which it slowly swallows up, washing away tower and town, and vanquishing all things; and the name of the river is TIME."

Then the dwarf's head sunk on his bosom, and he spoke no more.

The Fairies proceeded:—"Above us," said the Prince, "rises one of the loftiest mountains of the Rhine; for mountains are the Dwarfs' home. When the Great Spirit of all made earth, he saw that the interior of the rocks and hills were tenantless; and yet, that a mighty kingdom and great palaces were hid within them; a dread and dark solitude: but lighted at times from the starry eyes of many jewels; and there was the treasure of the human world—gold and silver—and great heaps of gems, and a soil of metals. So God made a race for this vast empire, and gifted them with the power of thought, and the soul of exceeding wisdom; so that they want not the merriment and enterprise of the outer world: but musing in

these dark caves is their delight. Their existence rolls away in the luxury of thought; only from time to time they appear in the world, and betoken woe or weal to men; according to their nature—for they are divided into two tribes, the benevolent and the wrathful." While the Prince spoke, they saw glaring upon them from a ledge in the upper rock a grisly face with a long matted beard. The Prince gathered himself up, and frowned at the evil Dwarf, for such it was; but with a wild laugh the face abruptly disappeared, and the echo of the laugh rang with a ghastly sound through the long hollows of the earth.

The Queen clung to Fayzenheim's arm. "Fear not, my Queen," said he; "the evil race hath no power over our light and aërial nature; with men only they war; and he whom we have seen was in the old ages of the world one of the deadliest visiters to mankind."

But now they came winding by a passage to a beautiful recess in the mountain empire; it was of a circular shape, and of amazing height, and in the midst of it played a natural fountain of sparkling waters, and around it were columns of massive granite, rising in countless vistas, till lost in the distant shade. Jewels were scattered round, and brightly played the fairy torches on the gem, the fountain, and the pale silver, that gleamed at frequent intervals from the rocks. "Here let us rest," said the gallant Fairy, clapping his hands—"what, ho! music and the feast."

So the feast was spread by the fountain's side; and the courtiers scattered rose-leaves, which they had brought with

them, for the Prince and his visiter; and amidst the dark kingdom of the Dwarfs broke the delicate sound of Fairy lutes. "We have not these evil beings in England," said the Queen, as low as she could speak; "they rouse my fear, but my interest also. Tell me, dear Prince, of what nature was the intercourse of the evil Dwarf with man."

"You know," answered the Prince, "that to every species of living thing there is something in common; the vast chain of sympathy runs through all creation. By that which they have in common with the beast of the field or the bird of the air, men govern the inferior tribes; they appeal to the common passions of fear and emulation when they tame the wild steed; to the common desire of greed and gain when they snare the fishes of the stream, or allure the wolves to the pitfall by the bleating of the lamb. In their turn, in the older ages of the world, it was by the passions which men had in common with the demon race, that the fiends commanded or allured them. The Dwarf, whom you saw, being of that race which is characterised by the ambition of power and the desire of hoarding, appealed then in his intercourse with men to the same characteristics in their own bosoms; to ambition or to avarice. And thus were his victims made! But, not now, dearest Nymphalin;" continued the Prince, with a more lively air—"not now will we speak of those gloomy beings. Ho, there! cease the music, and come hither all of ye—to listen to a faithful and homely history of the Dog, the Cat, the Griffin, and the Fox."