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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

Hugo, Victor

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Part XVII.

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PECOPIN shrugged his shoulders.

"Baldour is alive, Baldour is free," thought he, "Baldour adores me! What have I to fear? It was exactly five years last night since I saw her last; and it is now five years and one day more. I shall find her lovelier than ever.

Twenty is the crowning age of female beauty! In those days of universal good faith, five years were a trifle, scarcely worth speaking of, in the separation of lovers.

Thus soliloquising, he approached the castle, and joyfully recognized every ornament of sculpture, every spike of the portcullis, every nail of the draw-bridge. He felt elated in knowing himself to be welcome. The threshold of the door on which we played as children, seems to welcome us as men, with the loving smile of a mother!

As he crossed the bridge, he noticed near the third arch, a superb oak, whose summit towered above the parapet.

"It is odd enough," thought he. "No oak used to stand there of old!"

He then remembered that previous to the day he had met the hunt of the Palatine, in playing with Baldour, he had scattered some acorns on the spot.

"Wonderful," thought he. "In five years the acorn has become oak. The ground must be excellent!"

Four birds were chattering in this tree, a jay, a blackbird, a magpie, and a crow. Pecopin scarcely remarked them, any more than he did a pigeon and a fowl in the farmyard hard at hand. He only thought of Bauldour, and hastened on his way. The sun was on the horizon, and varlets had just lowered the drawbridge.

As Pecopin passed over, he heard in his rear a shout of laughter, distant, but distinct. He could not discover any one. It was the devil, laughing a chuckle in his caverns below.

Under the arch was a reservoir of the most mirror-like smoothness: the knight leaned over it as over a glass. After the toils of such a journey he expected to find himself in rags; and after the emotions of that supernatural night, feared to behold his own disturbed countenance. But either by virtue of the talisman, or through the effect of the elixir administered by the devil, he found himself looking handsomer and younger than ever!

What astonished him most, was the magnificence of his dress. In the confusion of his ideas he could not make out how he came to be so splendidly equipped; he looked like a Prince or Genius.

While thus contemplating himself, he heard a still louder and more joyous laugh than before, but still he saw no one. The devil was laughing in his sleeve. Pecopin traversed the courtyard of state, and the men-at-arms leaned over the walls to look at him, but he recognized none of them, nor they him.

The maidens wringing out the linen also turned round to gaze, but there was not a familiar face in the group. He was so good-looking, however, that no one interrupted his progress; good looks are the credentials of good birth and breeding.

Knowing his way, he turned straight towards the winding staircase leading to Bauldour's chamber. In passing through the court, the walls had struck him as unusually time-worn, and he fancied that the ivy growing upon the northern tower had thickened beyond all measure, as well as the vines on the southern side. But a true and loving heart does not pause at such a moment, to ruminate on trifles!

Arrived at the turret, he with difficulty recognised the door. The vaulting of these stairs was screw-cut, and geometrically suspended, and at the departure of Pecopin, Bauldour's father had reconstructed the entrance with the beautiful white stone of Heidelberg. This entrance, though only built five years, was now dark and moss grown, while under the archway several swallows had established their homes. But was it a time for a man in love to ponder upon the construction of swallows' nests?

Could flashes of lightning ascend a staircase, I should compare them to the movements of Pecopin. In the twinkling of an eye he was on the fifth story, near the chamber of Bauldour, the door of which was still the same, neither black nor changed, but gay, neat, and spotless; the brass work brilliant as silver; and the knots of the wood sparkling as a maiden's eye. All was evidently carefully looked to by the waiting-women of Bauldour.

The key was in the door, as if Pecopin had been

expected. He had only to turn it and enter. Nevertheless, he paused, for he was breathless with joy and happiness, to say nothing of having mounted five stories! Rosy flames flashed across his brow, while his head throbbed violently, and his heart heaved high within him. All these emotions having gradually subsided, and silence being restored in his soul, he listened.

In what words are we to describe the condition of the poor heart so intoxicated with delight?

Nevertheless, all he heard within was the monotonous humming of a wheel!