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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

Hugo, Victor

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Part XII.

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PART XII.

DESCRIPTION OF AN UNPLEASANT LODGING.

THE nature of this edifice it would be difficult to define. It was a house strong as a citadel, splendid as a palace, yet having the sinister look of a cavern, and the silence of the grave.

Not a voice was heard, nor a shadow seen amid its precincts. This mysterious castle was surrounded by a boundless forest. The moon had vanished, and in the sky there were only a few stars, as red as blood.

The horse stopped short before a flight of steps leading to a wide but closed door. Pecopin looked to the right and left, and seemed to distinguish along the whole range of this immense edifice other knights standing silent and motionless as himself, at the foot of other flights of steps leading to other doors. He now drew his dagger, and struck the marble balustrade; when instantly he heard the blast of the old man's horn, powerful and astounding, like the stormy trumpet of an angel of darkness. This horn, the blast of which bent the trees, echoed like an infernal howl amid the universal darkness.

On the sounds ceasing, the double doors of the castle flew open as if forced by an internal gust of

wind, and a flood of light burst forth. The jennet dashed up the flight of steps, carrying the knight into a splendidly illuminated hall, of which the tapestry represented subjects taken from the Roman history, the intervening frame-work being of cypress-wood and ivory. Above, was a gallery full of flowers and shrubs, and in an angle, a rotunda paved with agate, devoted to the women. The remaining parts of the pavement represented in mosaic the siege of Troy. The hall, however, was deserted. Nothing could be more depressing than all this blaze of magnificence combined with such profound solitude.

The jennet proceeded unurged, his hoofs resounding solemnly on the pavement, till he entered another hall, as splendid as the first, but equally lonely. Immense pannels of cedar, richly carved, covered the walls; in which an ingenious artist had inserted some marvellous pictures, glittering with mother-of-pearl and gold. The subjects were battles, hunts, castles, and fêtes, representing castles full of fireworks, besieged by fauns and wild men; tourneys and marine fights, with all kinds of vessels sailing upon a sea of turquoise, emeralds and sapphire, which imitated the swell and colour of the ocean.

Above these pictures was an admirably executed frieze, representing the three species of terrestrial beings endowed with intelligence, *viz.*, giants, men, and dwarfs; in which the giants and dwarfs were made to humiliate man, who is inferior in size to the giants, and in intellect to the dwarfs.

The fresco on the ceilings seemed to affect a

malicious homage to human genius. It was composed entirely of medallions, in which, by the lustre of a gloomy light, and crowned with infernal crowns, were represented the portraits of all the authors of useful discoveries, for that reason called "benefactors of humanity." Every man figured there in virtue of his particular invention; Arabus for the science of medicine, Dædalus for labyrinths, Pisis-tratus for books, Aristotle for libraries, Tubal-cain for the forge, Architas for engines of war, Noah for navigation, Abraham for geometry, Moses for the trumpet, Amphictyon for the expounding of dreams, Frederick Barbarossa for falconry, and one Bachou of Lyons for the squaring of the circle. In the angles and encoignures figured, like the principal constellations of heaven, many illustrious faces; Flavius, who invented the sea-compass; Christopher Columbus, who discovered America; Bortargus, who invented sauces; Mars, who invented war; Faustus, who invented printing; Schwartz, who invented gunpowder; and Pope Pontian, who invented cardinals. Many of these illustrious personages were unknown to Pecopin, owing perhaps to the startling fact of their non-existence till after the date of this history!

Following the guidance of his steed, the knight passed on through successive galleries; in one of which he remarked, on the eastern side, an inscription in letters of gold:—"The caoué of the Arabs, sometimes called 'cavé,' is an herb which abounds in Turkey, and in India is called miraculous. It should be prepared in the following manner:—Take an ounce of this herb, pulverize it, and steep it for

four hours in spring water. Then boil it until reduced to a third. Drink it leisurely, by degrees. Those who can afford it, add sugar or ambergris."

Opposite to this, on the western side, another inscription bore as follows:—"The Greek fire is made of charcoal of willow, salt, spirit, sulphur, pitch, incense, and camphor. It burns even in water, and consumes all it touches."

In another hall there was nothing but a portrait of the lackey who, at the feast of Trimalcion, went round the table singing the praises of sauce made with gum benjamin.

In all directions lustres, candelabra, and girandoles, reflected by enormous mirrors of steel and copper, lit up these rich apartments; in which Pecopin could not discern one living soul, though he wandered with haggard eyes and troubled mind, overcome by those depressing ideas which agitate our reveries in the sombre recesses of the woods.

At length he found himself in face of a door of metal, in which was set, encircled by a wreath of jewels, a huge apple. On this was written—

"ADAM FOUND THE MEAL;
EVE MET WITH THE DESSERT."
