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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Part XI.

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PART XI.

WHAT ONE MAY RISK BY MOUNTING A STRANGE HORSE."

AT the sound of the horn, thousands of strange lights flickered through the forests, shadows danced among the bushes, and shouts echoed in the distance. When the horses neighed, the trees shook as with a storm. At that moment a cracked bell struck twelve, and lo! at the twelfth stroke, the old man gave another blast from his ivory horn, and away went the dogs like shot, the yells redoubling, and the whole troop, including Pecopin and his patron, were off at a gallop!

The rapid, startling, and supernatural pace which bore off Pecopin so fiercely that every stroke of the horse's hoof told upon his brain as if it were upon the pavement, inebriated him as if with wine, and excited him as if on the field of battle. It was a gallop which began like the wind, but ended in a whirlwind!

The forest was immense, the hunters innumerable. Glade succeeded glade. The wind was howling, the hounds were in full cry, when the colossal black outline of a huge sixteen-horned stag was seen bounding here and there. The knight's horse was terribly blown. The trees bent down to witness the mysterious chase, and bent back again after having

seen it. Supernatural blasts of horns were heard at intervals, and louder than all, the clarion of the old hunter. Pecopin knew not where he was, but on galloping near some ruins standing amidst a clump of firs, he perceived a cascade tumbling from a wall of porphyry, which induced him to suppose that he was near the castle of Nideck. To his left he saw mountains resembling the lower Vosges, and at last recognized the four summits of the Ban de la Roche, the Champ du Feu, the Climont, and Ungensberg. A moment afterwards he was in the higher Vosges. In less than a quarter of an hour, his horse had traversed Giromagny, the Rotobac, the Sultz, the Barenkopf, the Graisson, the Bressoir, the Haut de Honce, the Mont de Lure, the Tête de l'Ours, Donon, and the great Ventron; these high peaks appeared confusedly and without order, as they might to some giant overlooking at a glance the great chain of Alsace.

At times he fancied he could discern the lakes these mountains bear on their summits, as if his horse were above them; and in this guise he saw himself reflected in the Pagan's Bath, the White and the Black Lakes. But he beheld himself as transiently as a swallow skimming over a stream. Still, strange and hopeless as this chace appeared, he felt secure on touching his talisman, and knowing he could not be far from the Rhine. Suddenly he was enveloped in a mist, the darkness became darker, and his Spanish jennet set off more furiously than before. Barely could he distinguish the ears of his horse. At such a moment, great must be the effort and great the merit to turn your thoughts towards

Heaven and your heart towards its liege lady. Our valiant knight, however, thought of both, but most of Bauldour perhaps, for he almost fancied that the moving winds murmured the name of "Heimberg."

Just then, a pricker bearing a torch flew through the mist, and by its light, Pecopin beheld a hawk flying above his head, transpierced by an arrow, yet still it flew on. As he paused to look at this bird, his horse plunged violently, the bird disappeared, and the torch vanished in the wood; Pecopin was again in darkness!

Presently the wind moaned anew, pronouncing "Vaugtsberg," and another light appearing in the mist showed a vulture, whose wing was pierced by a javelin, but which still flew on.

Pecopin would fain have opened his eyes to see, and his mouth to cry aloud, but in a glimpse both torch, vulture, and javelin vanished from his sight. His steed had not slackened its pace for all these phantoms, more than though it were the blind horse of the demon Paphos, or the deaf steed of King Sisymordachus.

The wind moaned a third time, and Pecopin clearly distinguished in its murmurs the name of "Rheinstein," while a third light illumined the trees in the mist, and another bird flew past; this was an eagle, with a shaft through its heart, but still firm upon the wing.

Pecopin now recalled to mind the chace of the Palsgrave, in which he had performed such prodigies: but the pace of the jennet now became so rapid, the trees and other objects in the nocturnal

landscape flew past him so rapidly, that, amid the awful velocity, he could scarcely fix his thoughts. The furious clamour of the horns was undiminished, and now and then the monstrous stag brushed past through the wilderness of thickets. By degrees, the fog cleared away; the air became warm, the ilexes, cork trees, Aleppo pines, and pistachio trees re-appeared among the rocks. A broad moon, with a splendid halo, lit up the trees. But the calendar marked no moonlight, for that night of mystery. While rushing through a hollow, Pecopin stooped to snatch up a handful of herbs; and on looking at them, found with despair that they were the vulnerary an-thylla of the Cévennes, the filiform veronica and common ferula, of which the hideous leaves terminate with claws. Half an hour afterwards, the wind became warmer, marine mirages glimmered through the openings of the forest; and lo! he stooped again and plucked more herbs. This time it was the silver cytissus of Cette, the starred anemomy of Nice, the marine lavatera of Toulon, the blood red geranium of the Pyrenees, with its cing-palmed leaf; and the *astrantia major*, the flower of which shines sunlike through a ring, like the planet Saturn.

Pecopin now perceived that he was leaving the Rhine behind him; having progressed two hundred leagues betwixt the gatherings of the flowers. Having traversed the Vosges and Cévennes, he was now on the Pyrenees!

“Rather let me die!” thought he; and he was about to fling himself from his horse, when he felt his legs confined as if by a grasp of iron; and

found that his stirrups held him prisoner. They were a pair of gaolers endowed with instinct of life!

Still did the distant cries, neighing, and yells continue as loud as ever! The old man's horn preceded the chace afar off, sounding mournful blasts; and in the openings of the forest, Pecopin beheld the hounds swimming through lakes abounding in magical reflections.

The knight closed his eyes and proceeded, resigned to his fate. Once, indeed, he opened them, when a heat almost tropical flushed his face, and on looking up, he beheld ruins of pagodas, upon the summits of which were seated rows of vultures, philosophers, and storks. The trees were of the strangest forms. He recognised the banyan and baobab, and saw that he was in an Indian forest. And once more, he closed his eyes in despair. A quarter of an hour afterwards, to the scorching breath of the equator had succeeded an icy chill. The cold was intense. The horse's hoofs crushed the rime, and bears and satyrs passed like shadows through the fog. The aspect of the scenery was forlorn and savage; and towards the horizon were stupendous rocks, round which hovered flocks of penguins and sea-gulls; and through the black vegetation, white waves spouted up their clouds of foam to heaven, which showered down flakes of snow in return. They had reached the eternal pine-forest of Biarmia, adjoining the icy region of Cape North.

Darkness came over the land, and Pecopin saw no further; but a fearful roar convinced him he was

near the Maelstrom, the *Tartarus* of the ancients, the navel of Oceanus the immortal! What could be the meaning of this never ending forest, which seemed to encircle the globe? The huge stag appeared now and then, ever flying—ever pursued; while the horn of the old man prevailed over all, even over the uproar of the Maelstrom!

Suddenly the jennet halted. The noise ceased. Pecopin opened his eyes once more, and beheld a gloomy and colossal edifice, whose windows seemed to contemplate him, like living eyes. The façade was black as a mask, but animated as a human face.
