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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

Hugo, Victor

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Part X.

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PART X.

EQUIS CANIBUSQUE.

UP he started, and saw an old gentleman in a superb hunting dress, standing a few steps off, completely equipped for the chase. A gold handled cutlass hung upon his thigh, while at his waist-belt was slung a horn composed of buffalo horn inlaid with pewter.

There was something strange and vague, though luminous, in his pale countenance, something resembling the last gleam of twilight. This old hunter, appearing alone in the forest at such an hour, must, under any circumstances, have excited surprise; but in the Wood of the Lost Footsteps he inspired awe. But this old man not being a dwarf, Pecopin felt satisfied that, for the present, he was safe from the acquaintance of Rollo.

The old hunter possessed a courteous and prepossessing countenance, and, though evidently an inveterate lover of the chase, and well accoutred, his hands were so wrinkled, and his legs so shrunk, that it would have been absurd to entertain alarm. His smile, when closely scrutinized, appeared like the superficial and official smile of a foolish old king.

"What do you want with me?" inquired Pecopin.

"To restore you to Bauldour," replied the old gentleman smiling.

"When, oh when!" was the instant rejoinder of the young lover.

"Pass a single night hunting with me in the forest, and on the morrow you shall be at her feet. Our chase finished, I will leave you in the morning at the gate of Falkenberg."

"Hunt at night?" retorted Pecopin.

"And why not, pray?"

"Because it is too absurd, and too fatiguing."

"How do you know, *you*, who have never tried?"

"Why do *you* try,—you, who are too old for such exploits?"

"Make yourself easy—you will find me young enough!"—replied the old sportsman.

"At all events, being tired, hungry, and thirsty, after a long day's walk, it is out of my power to mount my horse."

"The old lord unbuckled from his side a silver mounted gourd, and presented it to Pecopin.—"Drink this!" said he. Pecopin raised the gourd to his lips, and scarcely had he tasted a few drops, when he felt quite revived. He was strong and alert, as if he had slept, eaten, and drunk. He was almost of opinion that he had drunk a drop too much.

"Come," cried he, "let us start and hunt the livelong night. I desire no better. But I am sure, you say, of seeing Bauldour in the morning?"

"After spending the night with me, you shall see her at dawn of day."

"But what guarantee do you give me for the fulfilment of your promise?"

"My presence, and the succour I have given you. I might have left you to die of hunger, exhaustion, and wretchedness, in the power of the dwarf Rollo; but I took pity on your case."

"Let us away, then!" replied Pecopin. "And at sunrise, I am to find myself at Falkenberg."

"Ho! there! Come on there!" cried the old Nimrod loudly to his suite. And having turned round while he was thus spouting, Pecopin discovered that he had a hump on his back; and no sooner did he attempt to move, than he proved to be lame as Vulcan.

At the summons of the old man, a troop of splendidly attired knights and princes rushed from the thick of the wood, and stationed themselves at a respectful distance round the aged hunter, all armed with boar knives, he alone having a horn. Night was set in, but two hundred attendants with flaming torches were in waiting.

"*Ebbene!*" said the master of the hunt, "*ubi sunt los perros?*"

This ominous admixture of Latin and Italian was displeasing to Pecopin.

But the old man called out impatiently, "The hounds! the hounds!"

Immediately a diabolical barking re-echoed through the wood, and a pack of hounds appeared, such as was fit for an emperor; the pricklers in yellow liveries and red hose, the kennelmen with ferocious faces, and aided by naked negroes, holding the hounds in leash. Such a marvellous pack perhaps was never before assembled, comprehending every known breed, divided into sets, according to their race and

instinct. The first was from England, together with one hundred brace of greyhounds, twelve couple of striped mastiffs, and the same number of stag hounds. The second set were Barbary mastiffs, white and red, of undaunted courage, and fit for the chase of beasts of prey. The third group was of Norwegian blood, yellow and wire-haired, verging upon red, with a white spot upon the neck and head—staunch of scent, bold and forward for the stag—grey dogs, with spotted backs, and legs furred like the feet of a hare, or streaked with red and black, being all of the most undeniable breed.

Pecopin, well versed in such matters, could not detect a blemish among them. The fourth pack was formidable indeed, consisting of the large black powerful dog of the abbey of St. Hubert, in the Ardennes, short-legged and slow, but which produces such excellent hounds for the chace of the wild boar, fox, and game of evil scent. Like those of Norway, they were all well born gentlemen, and had evidently been nurtured near the heart. Their head was of a moderate size, rather long than flat, the mouth black, the ears wide, the loins curved, the shoulders broad, the legs thick, the thighs well set, the tail well hung, and taper towards the end, the coat rough under the belly, the feet hard and sure as those of a fox.

The fifth pack was of oriental origin, and must have been of exceeding value, being derived from Palimbotra—a race trained to attack wild bulls, as the dogs of Cintiqui to hunt the lions; besides the dogs of Monomotapa, which figure in the royal guard of the Emperors of the East. All these dogs,

whether Indian, English, or Norwegian, howled together in accordant discordance, like certain parliamentary assemblages of the present time. Pecopin, enraptured by this display of venery, could scarce suppress his ardour for the field.

He could scarcely, however, account for their sudden presence, as he certainly ought to have heard their cry previous to their appearance. The head pricker stood with his back turned a few steps from Pecopin, who went up to him, and put his hand upon his shoulder: when, lo! as he turned round, his face was masked! Pecopin was struck dumb! He hesitated whether to join a chace so mysterious; when the old man came up and accosted him.

"Well, sir knight," said he, "what think you of our hounds?"

"That it requires good steeds, sir, to follow such dogs!" was the reply.

Without answering, the old man applied a silver whistle, fixed upon his little finger, to his mouth; on blowing which, a rush was heard among the trees, the attendants drew up, and four grooms in scarlet came forth, leading two magnificent steeds. One was a beautiful Spanish jennet, jet black, and of exquisite carriage and shape; the other, a Tartar barb, with a slightly arched neck, from which streamed down a thick and frizzled mane. The tail, also, swept the ground; his eyes were large and fiery, his mouth wide, his ears restless, his forehead starred; in the full force and vigour of seven years old. The first had a head and breast piece, and was equipped for feats of arms. The second was less formidably, but more splendidly caparisoned,

with a silver bit, a gold embroidered bridle, with royal saddle, and brocaded housings. The one snorted, plunged, champed, and pawed, as if impatient for the fight. The other gazed around, as if eager only for admiration, slightly neighing, scarcely deigning to touch the earth, and assuming all the airs of royalty. Both were black as ebony, and Pecopin fixed his eyes with admiration of two such wondrous animals.

“And which do you choose, pray?” inquired the old gentleman, still smiling. Pecopin instantly vaulted into the saddle of the jennet.

“Are you well in your saddle?” inquired the old man; and Pecopin having answered in the affirmative, his aged companion, laughing heartily, began to tear away the trappings and housings of the Tartar, and seizing his mane, sprang up like a tiger, and bestrode the magnificent animal, which trembled under him in every limb; then, grasping his horn, he sounded such a blast, that Pecopin, almost stunned, could have fancied that his decrepit chest contained claps of thunder!
