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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Part VII.

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PART VII.

A PLEASING PROPOSITION FROM AN OLD SCHOLAR LIVING IN
A HUT OF LEAVES.

ON coming to himself, he heard a gentle voice exclaim "*Phi sma*," which means in the Arab tongue, "he is in heaven!" A hand was softly laid upon his bosom, and he now heard a graver voice reply: "*Ló! ló! machi mouth*," meaning "no, no, he is not dead!" and on opening his eyes, he beheld an old man and a young maiden kneeling by his side.

The old man was black as night, with a long white beard plaited in small tresses, in the fashion of the ancient magi, and was dressed in a tight-fitting wrapper of green silk. The young maiden was of a copper complexion, with large eyes of porcelain, and lips of coral. She had also rings of gold at her nose and ears, and was exceeding fair to look on.

Pecopin was no longer upon the borders of the sea. The breeze of hell had accidentally borne him into a valley of rocks and strange-looking trees. He rose: the old man and young maiden gazed calmly into his face. When he approached the trees, the leaves curled up, the branches withdrew, the flowers, which were of a delicate white, became red. The trees seemed to retire as he advanced!

By this sign, Pecopin recognised the mimosa, or tree of shame, and knew that he had quitted India, and was in the famous country of Pudiferan.

The old man now made him a sign, Pecopin followed him, and some minutes afterwards, all three were seated upon a mat in a cabin covered with palm-leaves, the interior of which glittered with precious stones. The old man, turning towards Pecopin, addressed him in German.

"My son," said he, "I am the man of universal knowledge, the great Ethiopian lapidary, the Taleb of the Arabs. Mankind call me Zin Eddin; the genii know me by the name of Evilmerodach. I am the first man who ever penetrated into this valley, you the second. I have devoted my life to the study of nature, the science of things, to the endowment of things with the science of the soul. Thanks to me, thanks to my lessons, to the rays which have fallen from my eyes during a century, here the stones live, and the plants think, and the animals are endowed with intellect. It is I who have taught a system of true medicine to the animals, such as is still unknown to man. I taught the pelican to bleed itself, and cure its young of the bite of the viper; the blind worm to eat fennel for the recovery of its sight; the bear suffering from cataract to incite the bees to sting his eyes; I furnished the eagle with the bezoar stone, which facilitates the laying of their eggs. If the jay purge himself with the laurel leaf, the tortoise with hemlock, the stag with dittany, the wolf with mandragora, the boar with ivy, the dove with helxine; if the horses, too full of blood, open the

vein of their thigh; if the lizard, at the period of changing its skin, swallow it to cure its epilepsy; if the swallow cure the ophthalmia of its young with the calidoine, which it seeks beyond the seas; if the weasel make a weapon of rue in its struggles with the snake—it is I, my son, I who taught them these lessons of wisdom.

“Till now, my instructions have been turned to animals. Long have I waited for a human scholar; you are come, and I am content. I am old and will bequeath you my hut, my jewels, my valley, and my learning. You shall also marry my daughter Aissab, who is passing beautiful; I will teach you to distinguish the ruby from the chrysolampis; to steep the mother-of-pearl in the salt-pot; and revive the fire of the ruby by steeping it in vinegar. Every day in vinegar adds a twelvemonth to their beauty. We will pass our lives together in picking up diamonds, and digging for roots. Be my son, and I will be to thee as a father.” “Thanks, venerable man, I accept your offer,” said Pecopin. But when darkness came over the land, he fled from the dwelling of Zin Eddin.