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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Part III.

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THE DIFFERENCE BETWIXT THE EAR OF AN OLD MAN AND THE
EAR OF A YOUNG ONE.

NEXT day, Bauldour was again spinning in her chamber, and Pecopin hunting in the forest. He was alone, and accompanied by a single hound; and in the course of the chase he accidentally found himself close by a farm, at the beginning of the forest of Sonn, which marks the limit of the domains of Sonneck and Falkenberg.

This farm was sheltered towards the east by four great trees, a beech, an elm, a pine, and an oak, known in the country as the four Evangelists. It appears that these trees were enchanted, for at the moment Pecopin passed four birds were perched upon their branches, a jay on the beech, a black-bird on the elm, a magpie on the larch, and a crow upon the oak. The chattering of these four birds seemed fancifully intermingled, as if questioning and answering. But above them all, was audible a pigeon cooing in the thick of the wood, and a hen cackling unseen in the farmyard of the farm.

Further on, an aged man was stacking roots against the coming winter. On seeing Pecopin approach, he rose and said, "Dost thou hear, sir knight, the discourse of yonder birds?"

"The discourse of birds?" retorted Pecopin;
"What matters their noise to me?"

"Sir," resumed the old man, "to the ear of youth the blackbird whistles, the jay chatters, the magpie gabbles, the crow croaks, the pigeon coos, the hen cackles. But, for the ear of age, birds have voices."

The knight laughed aloud.

"You are dreaming, old man!"

"It is rather you who dream, Sir Pecopin!" retorted the old man.

"How came you to know my name?" cried the knight.

"The birds told it to me;" quoth the old man.

"You are a greater goose than them all!" cried the knight; and, half jesting and half angry, he went his way.

About an hour afterwards, as he was crossing a glade, he heard the sound of horns, and suddenly there appeared a troop of knights, being the chase of the count palatine, comprising the Burgraves who are lords of the castles, and the Ländgraves who are lords of the forest, and the Rhinegraves who are lords of the Rhine, and the Raugraves who are lords by the right of the strong-arm.

A knight-banneret of the Palsgrave, named Garfred, perceiving Pecopin, exclaimed—"Ho, there! sir knight! why hunt you not with us?"

"Whither are ye bound?" inquired Pecopin.

"We are going to attack a kite at Heimberg, which has committed havoc among our pheasants; a vulture at Vaugtsberg, which attacks our falcons; an eagle at Rheinstein, which destroys our sparrow-hawks. Come with us, and be of our company."

"When do you return?" inquired Pecopin.

"To-morrow."

"Then I am of your party!" was his stout reply.

Nevertheless the chace lasted three days. On the first, Pecopin killed the kite; on the second, the vulture; on the third, the eagle. The count palatine was amazed at his skill.

"Sir knight," said he, "I present you with the fief of Rheineck, a dependence of my castle of Gutefels. Follow me to Stähleck to receive the investiture, and to proffer the oath of allegiance, in public mall and in presence of the pursuivants—" *in mallo publico et coram scabinis*," according to the forms of our holy emperor Charlemagne."

There was no choice but to comply. Pecopin made known to Bauldour that the gracious will of the Palsgrave compelled him to proceed to Stähleck for a serious and important affair.—"Be not alarmed, my dear love," added he, "I shall return for sure next month."

The messenger despatched, Pecopin followed the palatine, and went to repose, with the other knights in the suite of the prince, in the guard-rooms of the Castle of Bacharach.

That night he dreamed a dream. He beheld anew the entrance to the forest of Sonneck, the farm, the four trees, and the four birds. But this time, the birds neither whistled, croaked, nor sung, but spoke. Their jabber, still accompanied by the cackle of the fowl, and the cooing of the pigeon, became a strange dialogue, which Pecopin heard distinctly in his sleep. The jay, after distinctly pronouncing the name of Pecopin, asserted him to be a

captive at Fez, among the Moors! The pigeon meanwhile mournfully repeated the name of "Baldour—Baldour!"

Pecopin awoke in an indescribable panic. The first thing he thought of was the strange old man, and his soul quaked within him, though he knew not why. When trying to recall and interpret his dream, he fell asleep again; and when again he woke, the sun was high in the heavens—the sun which drives away spectres, annihilates dreams, and gilds the mists of the sky. He thought no more, therefore, of the four trees and four birds, but prepared himself for the toils and pleasures of the day.