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A steam voyage up the Rhine

Hugo, Victor

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Part XIV.

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PART XIV.

A NEW MODE OF FALLING FROM A HORSE.

THE cry of the hounds and horn approached. A double door, opposite to that by which Pecopin had entered, was thrown open; and he saw two hundred varlets bearing upon an immense gold trencher the sixteen-horned stag, smoking in a sea of gravy.

In front of the varlets, bearing their flaming torches, came the old man, horn in hand, mounted upon his Tartar steed, white with foam. He no longer blew his horn, but smiled courteously in the midst of the bellowing hounds, still led on by the pricker in the black mask.

The moment the procession entered the hall, the torches turned blue, and the dogs became mute. These hideous animals, with their lion jowls and tiger roar, followed at the heels of their master, their heads depressed, and tails betwixt their legs, their bodies shivering, and eyes supplicating, towards the table, at which, in statue-like immobility, presided the silent and mysterious guests.

On approaching the table, and surveying his joyless companions, the old man shouted with laughter.

"*Hombres y mugeres,*" said he, "*cr ça, vosotros*

belle signore, domini et dominæ, amigos mios, comment va la besogne ?"

"You are late," said the brazen guest, in a brazen voice.

"I had a friend with me, to whom I wanted to show something of hunting," replied the old man.

"It is time, however, that you came!" replied Nimrod; and at the same moment he pointed with his thumb over his brazen shoulder, towards the further extremity of the hall.

Pecopin's eye followed the indication of the giant; and he saw, vaguely defined upon the black walls, luminous arches, like windows, which seemed to receive the first light of the dawning day.

"Well, well!" resumed the hunter, "we must fall to in better earnest." And lo! the varlets bearing the stag, assisted by the negroes, prepared to set the dish upon the table, at the foot of the seven-branched candlestick.

Pecopin now put spurs to his jennet, which, strange to say, obeyed the hint: no doubt on account of the approach of day, which is not favorable to the interests of magic. Passing betwixt the varlets and the table, he stood up, sword in hand, in the stirrups, looking sternly and straight into the sinister faces of the guests and the aged hunter, exclaiming, with a voice of thunder: "Whoever you be,—demons, ghosts, spectres, or emperors,—I charge ye, move not a step; or, by the saints! I will teach you all, even you, oh! man of bronze, the weight of the iron heel of a living knight, upon the pale visage of a phantom. I am perhaps in a cavern of shadows; but I will do real and terrible

deeds! As for you, old man, you can doubtless draw your weapon, who so bravely wind a horn. Defend yourself, then! for were you Pluto, the lord of hell, I would cleave you from head to heel."

"Softly, softly, my noisy friend!" replied the old man. "We will talk over business after supper."

This insolence exasperated the knight. "Defend yourself, old man," cried he. "Promise-breaker, I say, defend yourself!"

"*Hijo!* a little patience, if you please," retorted the old gentleman.

"Draw, I say!" persisted Pecopin.

"Pho, pho! my excellent friend, you are over-hasty."

"Give me back Bauldour, then!" said the knight, "give me back Bauldour, as you promised."

"How know you that I mean to disappoint you? But what will you do with her, pray, when you see her again?"

"She is my betrothed, and must become my bride!" answered Pecopin.

"A fine couple you would make, truly," said the old man, shaking his head. "After all, what matters it to me? All is decreed. A bad example is offered to man and womankind by the sun and moon above, who live separate, and are a most disunited couple!"

"A truce to jesting, I say, or I exterminate both devils and goddesses!" cried Pecopin. "Another moment, and your cavern shall be unpeopled."

The old man chuckled in reply; and the infuriated Pecopin rushed upon him, sword in hand. But suddenly his horse trembled and crouched: the

cold rays of daylight had penetrated the cavern, and, excepting the old man, all began to vanish. The lights and torches became gradually extinguished. The pupils of the spectres' eyes, for a moment vivified by the threats of Pecopin, became dim as ever; and he began to see through the brazen mass of the giant, as through a veil, the columns at the extremity of the hall.

His horse became impalpable under him, and sinking to the earth, the feet of Pecopin nearly touched the ground. And lo! a cock crew, with a shrill metallic sound, which penetrated the ear of Pecopin like a blade of steel.

At the same instant a chilling gust blew through the hall, and his horse fell under him. He tottered and fell. When he rose up again, the whole scene was changed! All had disappeared. He found himself alone, with a drawn sword in his hand, in a ravine overgrown with briars, close beside a bubbling spring. The door of an old castle was close at hand! Day was dawning around him; and, on raising his eyes, he shouted for joy.

That castle was the Castle of Falkenberg!