

Mysterious castle of Baron von Gut

By ALAN DOERKSON

Part 3

I rested in peace, except for a call of nature I had in the early hours of the morning. I had to traipse down the entire staircase, and the look for the W.C. My feet nearly froze on the cold marble steps, but my trip was well worth the effort it took. Next morning I woke up about 9 a.m., with the sun shining brightly in, through a bay window over the bed. I dragged myself out of bed, opened the window and felt the cool, fresh morning breeze blow in. The view from the tower was quite remarkable. Directly below me spread the expanse of the castle itself, which turned out to be a collage of architectural designs, from Greek to Gothic. It was like looking down from the top of a cathedral tower, except there were no gargoyles. Just then, I saw something move on the twin tower opposite me. However, it looked more like an orangutan than a gargoyle. I was relieved.

Beyond the Baron's castle were acres of rolling hills, clad in majestic oaks and pines, above which rose the occasional rocky crag. Out in the distance flowed the Rhine, a faint, blue ribbon on the

horizon. As the sun slowly climbed through the clear, blue sky I caught the glint of a pool of water, hidden among the trees about a kilometer away. It was fed by a winding stream which seemed to approach the castle quite closely. Glancing over the grounds near the castle, I noticed a wide variety of vegetation, including what looked like some palm trees and some cactuses. It seemed the baron was a botanist of peculiar skills. In fact, I hadn't seen the half of it.

Getting dressed, I went downstairs (all 237) and rang the tubular bells. While I was waiting for Juliana or Quasimoron to show up, I glanced around the corridor, lit up by the morning's sunlight. Standing halfway down the hall was a fully-dressed suit of gold-plated armour, complete with a battle-axe (which reminded me of Margaret Thatcher). Mounted on one wall was a series of two dozen portraits of men and women, who all resembled each other in a gruesome way. However, it was obvious the paintings were done by different artists. One looked a Remnant portrait, one was impressionistic, one (of a sexy female subject) was done in black velvet, and one looked like a cartoon by

Gary Trudeau. I was admiring the art collection when I was suddenly tapped on the shoulder. I spun around, and found Quasimoron at my heels.

"You rang, sir?" he enquired.

"I'd like to ring your neck, you Schweinhund! Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"My apologies, sir. The shag rugs here have a way of absorbing sounds." He pointed to the floor, on which lay a carpet of golden yak-fur, probably from Tibet or Bhutan. "I see you were admiring the portraits of the baron's family."

"So that's who they are. Does the baron also have beady eyes and a double chin?"

"I'm afraid so. It's a common failing among the von Guts. But then, you should see my family tree!"

"Where's it kept, in the vaults of Robert Ripoff's museum?" I quipped. The butler grimaced.

"By the way, Juliana has just prepared breakfast. If you feel so inclined, I will show you to the dining room."

I complied, having not had a decent meal since leaving Cannes. We arrived at a comfortable room, dominated by a round, ornately carved

mahogany table, with a set of thirteen chairs, upholstered in plush velvet. Above the table hung a dazzling, crystal chandelier, and the ceiling of the room was a duplicate of the Sistine Chapel.

"Nice breakfast nook you've got here," I drawled. "What's on the menu, anyway?"

In answer to my question, Juliana came in with a tray full of food. I helped myself to some bacon and eggs, cafe au lait and croissants with jam.

"Sure beats your average Continental breakfast," I commented. When I was done, I asked Quasimoron to show me the grounds (not the coffee grounds, stupid!). He agreed, and took me to a set of glass doors, which opened onto a palazzade lined with Corinthian columns. Ahead of me, spread the most incredible garden I'd ever seen (but that's not saying much).

"Mind if I take a look?" I enquired.

"Go ahead, but watch out for the snakes," Quasimoron answered candidly. At this point, he drew a matchete from his robe and handed it to me, saying, "You'd better take this with you, Herr Zuma. You never know what you might meet..."

"Now, wait a minute! I thought you were going to give me a guided tour of the grounds."

"All I said was that I would show them to you," he clarified. "And there they are!" He chuckled ominously and crept inside the doors, which I heard him lock.

"So that's the story!" I said to myself. "Well I'm not gonna let him intimidate me!"

So saying, I strode down into the garden. Around me were hundreds of unusual plants. Ferns twenty feet high flanked the flagstone path and I half expected a dinosaur to materialize before my eyes. Just then, a giant iguana crossed the path. I froze in my tracks and watched in silence

as it disappeared in the brush. This place was wierder than I had expected. The ferns gave

way to tropical rainforest, with massive trees dominating the landscape. A dense canopy of branches now blocked out the sun, so I proceeded slowly, allowing my eyes to adjust to the dark. Ahead of me, another set of eyes stared back at me.

"Whozat?" I asked. I heard a growl and realized that I was addressing a sabre-toothed tiger. I slowly backed off until I was out of sight, then turned and made a mad dash for the edge of the jungle. I came to clearing, but found myself up against a field of six-foot-high grass. I took out the machete and started slashing my way through it.

"What I need is a lawnmower, not an antique sword!" I said to myself.

Nevertheless, I made some progress and soon came to a well-worn path. I was relieved until I saw a pack of wild boars heading my way. I dived back into the grass to escape the stampeding herd. When the dust had cleared, I ventured back onto the trail and cautiously followed it. The next thing I knew, I had come to a swamp. It was not hard to tell, because my feet immediately sank in the muck. I hastily found firm footing, and searched for a solid path.

Around me grew drooping cypress trees and assorted scrub. Something was swimming up to me. It was long and green with scaly skin. As I watched, it opened its gargantuan mouth and gargled at me, revealing a hundred finely-honed teeth and a couple of golf balls. That instant I realized that it was an alligator. By this time, it was much closer so I plunged back through the swamp. Then it happened: I hit a patch of quicksand. In desperation, I tried to free myself while the reptile ate up the distance between us (literally!).

Christmas events for kids

Throughout the month of December the Exhibition Centre plans special Christmas events for children. The

regular Wednesday afternoon Film and Story Hour continues at 2:30 p.m. on December 8 and 15 with stories and films about Christmas. The last story hour for this year will be on December 22 and on that day youngsters will also be able to

make a Christmas decoration and enjoy a Christmas party.

On Sunday, December 12, 2-4 p.m. the Centre will hold its Annual Christmas Tree-Trimming Party. Youngsters (and oldsters too) are invited to come and help us decorate

our Christmas tree. Materials for constructing decorations will be provided but any handmade decorations brought from home will be welcomed too. There will also be plenty of Kool-aid and cookies. All are welcome to attend and join

in the festivities.

The Explorations Gallery, second floor in the Exhibition Centre building, opens a new exhibit on December 11. An exhibit of recent watercolours, entitled Maritime Flavour by Fredericton artist, Nora Goss, will be shown from December 11 until January 16. The public is invited to an opening reception on Sunday, December 12, 2-4 p.m.



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