

TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER II

In which the Baron proves himself a good shot-He loses his horse, and finds a wolf-Makes him draw his sledge-Promises to entertain his company with a relation of such facts as are well deserving their notice.

I set off from Rome on a journey to Russia, in the midst of winter, from a just notion that frost and snow must of course mend the roads, which every traveller had described as uncommonly bad through the northern parts of Germany, Poland, Courland, and Livonia. I went on horseback, as the most convenient manner of travelling; I was but lightly clothed, and of this I felt the inconvenience the more I advanced north-east. What must not a poor old man have suffered in that severe weather and climate, whom I saw on a bleak common in Poland, lying on the road, helpless, shivering, and hardly having wherewithal to cover his nakedness? I pitied the poor soul: though I felt the severity of the air myself, I threw my mantle over him, and immediately I heard a voice from the heavens, blessing me for that piece of charity, saying-

"You will be rewarded, my son, for this in time."

I went on: night and darkness overtook me. No village was to be seen. The country was covered with snow, and I was unacquainted with the road.

Tired, I alighted, and fastened my horse to something like a pointed stump of a tree, which appeared above the snow; for the sake of safety I placed my pistols under my arm, and laid down on the snow, where I slept so soundly that I did not open my eyes till full daylight. It is not easy to conceive my astonishment to find myself in the midst of a village, lying in a churchyard; nor was my horse to be seen, but I heard him soon after neigh somewhere above me. On looking upwards I beheld him hanging by his bridle to the weather-cock of the steeple. Matters were now very plain to me: the village had been covered with snow overnight; a sudden change of weather had taken place; I had sunk down to the churchyard whilst asleep, gently, and in the same proportion as the snow had melted away; and what in the dark I had taken to be a stump of a little tree appearing above the snow, to which I had tied my horse, proved to have been the cross or weather-cock of the steeple!

Without long consideration I took one of my pistols, shot the bridle in two, brought the horse, and proceeded on my journey. [Here the Baron seems to have forgot his feelings; he should certainly have ordered his horse a feed of corn, after fasting so long.]

He carried me well-advancing into the interior parts of Russia. I found travelling on horseback rather unfashionable in winter, therefore I submitted, as I always do, to the custom of the country, took a single horse sledge, and drove briskly towards St. Petersburg. I do not exactly recollect whether it was in Eastland or Jugemanland, but I remember that in the midst of a dreary forest I spied a terrible wolf making after me, with all the speed of ravenous winter hunger. He soon overtook me. There was no possibility of escape. Mechanically I laid myself down flat in the sledge, and let my horse run for our safety. What I wished, but hardly hoped or expected, happened immediately after. The wolf did not mind me in the least, but took a leap over me, and falling furiously on the horse, began instantly to tear and devour the hind-part of the poor animal, which ran the faster for his pain and terror. Thus unnoticed and safe myself, I lifted my head slyly up, and with horror I beheld that the wolf had ate his way into the horse's body; it was not long before he had fairly forced himself into it, when I took my

advantage, and fell upon him with the butt-end of my whip. This unexpected attack in his rear frightened him so much, that he leaped forward with all his might: the horse's carcass dropped on the ground, but in his place the wolf was in the harness, and I on my part whipping him continually: we both arrived in full career safe at St. Petersburg, contrary to our respective expectations, and very much to the astonishment of the spectators.

I shall not tire you, gentlemen, with the politics, arts, sciences, and history of this magnificent metropolis of Russia, nor trouble you with the various intrigues and pleasant adventures I had in the politer circles of that country, where the lady of the house always receives the visitor with a dram and a salute. I shall confine myself rather to the greater and nobler objects of your attention, horses and dogs, my favourites in the brute creation; also to foxes, wolves, and bears, with which, and game in general, Russia abounds more than any other part of the world; and to such sports, manly exercises, and feats of gallantry and activity, as show the gentleman better than musty Greek or Latin, or all the perfume, finery, and capers of French wits or *petit-mâîtres*.

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