

TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER XXI

The Baron insists on the veracity of his former Memoirs—Forms a design of making discoveries in the interior parts of Africa—His discourse with Hilaro Frosticos about it—His conversation with Lady Fragrantia—The Baron goes, with other persons of distinction, to Court; relates an anecdote of the Marquis de Bellecourt.

All that I have related before, said the Baron, is gospel; and if there be any one so hardy as to deny it, I am ready to fight him with any weapon he pleases. Yes, cried he, in a more elevated tone, as he started from his seat, I will condemn him to swallow this decanter, glass and all perhaps, and filled with kerren-wasser [a kind of ardent spirit distilled from cherries, and much used in some parts of Germany]. Therefore, my dear friends and companions, have confidence in what I say, and pay honour to the tales of Munchausen. A traveller has a right to relate and embellish his adventures as he pleases, and it is very unpolite to refuse that deference and applause they deserve.

Having passed some time in England since the completion of my former memoirs, I at length began to revolve in my mind what a prodigious field of discovery must be in the interior part of Africa. I could not sleep with the thoughts of it; I therefore determined to gain every proper assistance from Government to penetrate the celebrated source of the Nile, and assume the viceroyship of the interior kingdoms of Africa, or, at least, the great realm of Monomotapa. It was happy for me that I had one most powerful friend at court, whom I shall call the illustrious Hilaro Frosticos. You perchance know him not by that name; but we had a language among ourselves, as well we may, for in the course of my peregrinations I have acquired precisely nine hundred and ninety-nine leash of languages. What! gentlemen, do you stare? Well, I allow there are not so many languages spoken in this vile world; but then, have I not been in the moon? and trust me, whenever I write a treatise upon education, I shall delineate methods of inculcating whole dozens of languages at once, French, Spanish, Greek, Hebrew, Cherokee, &c., in such a style as will shame all the pedagogues existing.

Having passed a whole night without being able to sleep for the vivid imagination of African discoveries, I hastened to the levee of my illustrious friend Hilaro Frosticos, and having mentioned my intention with all the vigour of fancy, he gravely considered my words, and after some awful meditations thus he spoke: *Olough, ma genesat, istum fullanah, cum dera kargos belgarasah esenum balgo bartigos triangulissimus!* However, added he, it behoveth thee to consider and ponder well upon the perils and the multitudinous dangers in the way of that wight who thus advanceth in all the perambulation of adventures: and verily, most valiant sire and Baron, I hope thou wilt demean thyself with all that laudable gravity and precaution which, as is related in the three hundred and forty-seventh chapter of the Prophylactics, is of more consideration than all the merit in this terraqueous globe. Yes, most truly do I advise thee unto thy good, and speak unto thee, most valiant Munchausen, with the greatest esteem, and wish thee to succeed in thy voyage; for it is said, that in the interior realms of Africa there are tribes that can see but just three inches and a half beyond the extremity of their noses; and verily thou shouldest moderate thyself, even sure and slow; they stumble who walk fast. But we shall bring you unto the Lady Fragrantia, and have her opinion of the matter. He then took from his pocket a cap of dignity, such as described in the most honourable and antique heraldry, and placing it upon my head, addressed me thus:—"As thou seemest again to revive the spirit of ancient adventure, permit me to place upon thy head this favour, as a mark of the esteem in which I hold thy valorous disposition."

The Lady FrAGRANTIA, my dear friends, was one of the most divine creatures in all Great Britain, and was desperately in love with me. She was drawing my portrait upon a piece of white satin, when the most noble HilARo Frosticos advanced. He pointed to the cap of dignity which he had placed upon my head. "I do declare, HilARo," said the lovely FrAGRANTIA, "'tis pretty, 'tis interesting; I love you, and I like you, my dear Baron," said she, putting on another plume: "this gives it an air more delicate and more fantastical. I do thus, my dear Munchausen, as your friend, yet you can reject or accept my present just as you please; but I like the fancy, 'tis a good one, and I mean to improve it: and against whatever enemies you go, I shall have the sweet satisfaction to remember you bear my favour on your head!"

I snatched it with trepidation, and gracefully dropping on my knees, I three times kissed it with all the rapture of romantic love. "I swear," cried I, "by thy bright eyes, and by the lovely whiteness of thine arm, that no savage, tyrant, or enemy upon the face of the earth shall despoil me of this favour, while one drop of the blood of the Munchausens doth circulate in my veins! I will bear it triumphant through the realms of Africa, whither I now intend my course, and make it respected, even in the court of Prester John."

"I admire your spirit," replied she, "and shall use my utmost interest at court to have you despatched with every pomp, and as soon as possible; but here comes a most brilliant company indeed, Lady Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs, Lord Spigot, and Lady Faucet, and the Countess of Belleair."

After the ceremonies of introduction to this company were over, we proceeded to consult upon the business; and as the cause met with general applause, it was immediately determined that I should proceed without delay, as soon as I obtained the sovereign approbation. "I am convinced," said Lord Spigot, "that if there be any thing really unknown and worthy of our most ardent curiosity, it must be in the immense regions of Africa; that country, which seems to be the oldest on the globe, and yet with the greater part of which we are almost utterly unacquainted; what prodigious wealth of gold and diamonds must not lie concealed in those torrid regions, when the very rivers on the coast pour forth continual specimens of golden sand! 'Tis my opinion, therefore, that the Baron deserves the applause of all Europe for his spirit, and merits the most powerful assistance of the sovereign."

So flattering an approbation, you may be sure, was delightful to my heart, and with every confidence and joy I suffered them to take me to court that instant. After the usual ceremonies of introduction, suffice it to say that I met with every honour and applause that my most sanguine expectations could demand. I had always a taste for the fashionable *je ne sais quoi* of the most elegant society, and in the presence of all the sovereigns of Europe I ever found myself quite at home, and experienced from the whole court the most flattering esteem and admiration. I remember, one particular day, the fate of the unfortunate Marquis de Bellecourt. The Countess of Rassinda, who accompanied him, looked most divinely. "Yes, I am confident," said the Marquis de Bellecourt to me, "that I have acted according to the strictest sentiments of justice and of loyalty to my sovereign. What stronger breast-plate than a heart untainted? and though I did not receive a word nor a look, yet I cannot think-no, it were impossible to be misrepresented. Conscious of my own integrity, I will try again -I will go boldly up." The Marquis de Bellecourt saw the opportunity; he advanced three paces, put his hand upon his breast and bowed. "Permit me," said he, "with the most profound respect, to--." His tongue faltered-he could scarcely believe his sight, for at that moment the whole company were moving out of the room. He found himself almost alone, deserted by every one. "What!" said he, "and did he turn upon his heel with the most marked contempt? Would he not speak to me? Would he not even hear me utter a word in my defence?" His heart died within him-not even a look, a smile from any one. "My friends! Do they not know me? Do they not see me? Alas! they fear to catch the contagion of my--. Then," said he, "adieu!-'tis more than I can bear. I shall go to my country seat, and never, never will return. Adieu, fond court, adieu!-"

The venerable Marquis de Bellecourt stopped for a moment ere he entered his carriage. Thrice he looked back, and thrice he wiped the starting tear from his eye. "Yes," said he, "for once, at least, truth shall be found—in the bottom of a well!"

Peace to thy ghost, most noble marquis! a King of kings shall pity thee; and thousands who are yet unborn shall owe their happiness to thee, and have cause to bless the thousands, perhaps, that shall never even know thy name; but Munchausen's self shall celebrate thy glory!

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