

TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER XXXI

A litigated contention between Don Quixote, Gog, Magog, &c.-A grand court assembled upon it-The appearance of the company-The matrons, judges, &c.-The method of writing, and the use of the fashionable amusement quizzes-Wauwau arrives from the country of Prester John, and leads the whole Assembly a wild-goose chase to the top of Plinlimmon, and thence to Virginia-The Baron meets a floating island in his voyage to America-Pursues Wauwau with his whole company through the deserts of North America-His curious contrivance to seize Wauwau in a morass.

The contention between Gog and Magog, and Sphinx, Hilario Frosticos, the Lord Whittington, &c., was productive of infinite litigation. All the lawyers in the kingdom were employed, to render the affair as complex and gloriously uncertain as possible; and, in fine, the whole nation became interested, and were divided on both sides of the question. Colossus took the part of Sphinx, and the affair was at length submitted to the decision of a grand council in a great hall, adorned with seats on every side in form of an amphitheatre. The assembly appeared the most magnificent and splendid in the world. A court or jury of one hundred matrons occupied the principal and most honourable part of the amphitheatre; they were dressed in flowing robes of sky-blue velvet adorned with festoons of brilliants and diamond stars; grave and sedate-looking matrons, all in uniform, with spectacles upon their noses; and opposite to these were placed one hundred judges, with curly white wigs flowing down on each side of them to their very feet, so that Solomon in all his glory was not so wise in appearance. At the ardent request of the whole empire I condescended to be the president of the court, and being arrayed accordingly, I took my seat beneath a canopy erected in the centre. Before every judge was placed a square inkstand, containing a gallon of ink, and pens of a proportionable size; and also right before him an enormous folio, so large as to serve for table and book at the same time. But they did not make much use of their pens and ink, except to blot and daub the paper; for, that they should be the more impartial, I had ordered that none but the blind should be honoured with the employment: so that when they attempted to write anything, they uniformly dipped their pens into the machine containing sand, and having scrawled over a page as they thought, desiring them to dry it with sand, would spill half a gallon of ink upon the paper, and thereby daubing their fingers, would transfer the ink to their face whenever they leaned their cheek upon their hand for greater gravity. As to the matrons, to prevent an eternal prattle that would drown all manner of intelligibility, I found it absolutely necessary to sew up their mouths; so that between the blind judges and the dumb matrons methought the trial had a chance of being terminated sooner than it otherwise would. The matrons, instead of their tongues, had other instruments to convey their ideas: each of them had three quizzes, one quiz pendent from the string that sewed up her mouth, and another quiz in either hand. When she wished to express her negative, she darted and recoiled the quizzes in her right and left hand; and when she desired to express her affirmative, she, nodding, made the quiz pendent from her mouth flow down and recoil again. The trial proceeded in this manner for a long time, to the admiration of the whole empire, when at length I thought proper to send to my old friend and ally, Prester John, entreating him to forward to me one of the species of wild and curious birds found in his kingdom, called a Wauwau. This creature was brought over the great bridge before mentioned, from the interior of Africa, by a balloon. The balloon was placed upon the bridge, extending over the parapets on each side, with great wings or oars to assist its velocity, and under the balloon was placed pendant a kind of boat, in which were the persons to manage the steerage of the machine, and protect Wauwau. This oracular bird, arriving in England, instantly darted through one of the windows of the great hall, and perched upon the canopy in the centre to the admiration of all present.

Her cackling appeared quite prophetic and oracular; and the first question proposed to her by the unanimous consent of the matrons and judges was, Whether or not the moon was composed of green cheese? The solution of this question was deemed absolutely necessary before they could proceed farther on the trial.

Wauwau seemed in figure not very much differing from a swan, except that the neck was not near so long, and she stood after an admirable fashion like to Vestris. She began cackling most sonorously, and the whole assembly agreed that it was absolutely necessary to catch her, and having her in their immediate possession, nothing more would be requisite for the termination of this litigated affair. For this purpose the whole house rose up to catch her, and approached in tumult, the judges brandishing their pens, and shaking their big wigs, and the matrons quizzing as much as possible in every direction, which very much startled Wauwau, who, clapping her wings, instantly flew out of the hall. The assembly began to proceed after her in order and style of precedence, together with my whole train of Gog and Magog, Sphinx, Hilaro Frosticos, Queen Mab's chariot, the bulls and crickets, &c., preceded by bands of music; while Wauwau, descending on the earth, ran on like an ostrich before the troop, cackling all the way. Thinking suddenly to catch this ferocious animal, the judges and matrons would suddenly quicken their pace, but the creature would as quickly outrun them, or sometimes fly away for many miles together, and then alight to take breath until we came within sight of her again. Our train journeyed over a most prodigious tract of country in a direct line, over hills and dales, to the summit of Plinlimmon, where we thought to have seized Wauwau; but she instantly took flight, and never ceased until she arrived at the mouth of the Potomac river in Virginia.

Our company immediately embarked in the machines before described, in which we had journeyed into Africa, and after a few days' sail arrived in North America. We met with nothing curious on our voyage, except a floating island, containing some very delightful villages, inhabited by a few whites and negroes; the sugar cane did not thrive there well, on account, as I was informed, of the variety of the climates; the island being sometimes driven up as far as the north pole, and at other times wafted under the equinoctial. In pity to the poor islanders, I got a huge stake of iron, and driving it through the centre of the island, fastened it to the rocks and mud at the bottom of the sea, since which time the island has become stationary, and is well known at present by the name of St. Christopher's, and there is not an island in the world more secure.

Arriving in North America, we were received by the President of the United States with every honour and politeness. He was pleased to give us all the information possible relative to the woods and immense regions of America, and ordered troops of the different tribes of the Esquimaux to guide us through the forests in pursuit of Wauwau, who, we at length found, had taken refuge in the centre of a morass. The inhabitants of the country, who loved hunting, were much delighted to behold the manner in which we attempted to seize upon Wauwau; the chase was noble and uncommon. I determined to surround the animal on every side, and for this purpose ordered the judges and matrons to surround the morass with nets extending a mile in height, on various parts of which net the company disposed themselves, floating in the air like so many spiders upon their cobwebs. Magog, at my command, put on a kind of armour that he had carried with him for the purpose, corselet of steel, with gauntlets, helmet, &c., so as nearly to resemble a mole. He instantly plunged into the earth, making way with his sharp steel head-piece, and tearing up the ground with his iron claws, and found not much difficulty therein, as morass in general is of a soft and yielding texture. Thus he hoped to undermine Wauwau, and suddenly rising, seize her by the foot, while his brother Gog ascended the air in a balloon, hoping to catch her if she could escape Magog. Thus the animal was surrounded on every side, and at first was very much terrified, knowing not which way she had best to go. At length hearing an obscure noise under ground, Wauwau took flight before Magog could have time to catch her by the foot. She flew to the right, then to the left, north, east, west, and south, but found on every side the company prepared upon their nets. At length she flew right up, soaring at

a most astonishing rate towards the sun, while the company on every side set up one general acclamation. But Gog in his balloon soon stopped Wauwau in the midst of her career, and snared her in a net, the cords of which he continued to hold in his hand. Wauwau did not totally lose her presence of mind, but after a little consideration, made several violent darts against the volume of the balloon; so fierce, as at length to tear open a great space, on which the inflammable air rushing out, the whole apparatus began to tumble to the earth with amazing rapidity. Gog himself was thrown out of the vehicle, and letting go the reins of the net, Wauwau got liberty again, and flew out of sight in an instant.

Gog had been above a mile elevated from the earth when he began to fall, and as he advanced the rapidity increased, so that he went like a ball from a cannon into the morass, and his nose striking against one of the iron-capped hands of his brother Magog, just then rising from the depths, he began to bleed violently, and, but for the softness of the morass, would have lost his life.

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