

TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER VII

The Baron relates his adventures on a voyage to North America, which are well worth the reader's attention—Pranks of a whale—A sea-gull saves a sailor's life—The Baron's head forced into his stomach—A dangerous leak stopped à posteriori.

I embarked at Portsmouth in a first-rate English man-of-war, of one hundred guns, and fourteen hundred men, for North America. Nothing worth relating happened till we arrived within three hundred leagues of the river St. Laurence, when the ship struck with amazing force against (as we supposed) a rock; however, upon heaving the lead we could find no bottom, even with three hundred fathom. What made this circumstance the more wonderful, and indeed beyond all comprehension, was, that the violence of the shock was such that we lost our rudder, broke our bowsprit in the middle, and split all our masts from top to bottom, two of which went by the board; a poor fellow, who was aloft furling the mainsheet, was flung at least three leagues from the ship; but he fortunately saved his life by laying hold of the tail of a large sea-gull, who brought him back, and lodged him on the very spot from whence he was thrown. Another proof of the violence of the shock was the force with which the people between decks were driven against the floors above them; my head particularly was pressed into my stomach, where it continued some months before it recovered its natural situation. Whilst we were all in a state of astonishment at the general and unaccountable confusion in which we were involved, the whole was suddenly explained by the appearance of a large whale, who had been basking, asleep, within sixteen feet of the surface of the water. This animal was so much displeased with the disturbance which our ship had given him—for in our passage we had with our rudder scratched his nose—that he beat in all the gallery and part of the quarter-deck with his tail, and almost at the same instant took the mainsheet anchor, which was suspended, as it usually is, from the head, between his teeth, and ran away with the ship, at least sixty leagues, at the rate of twelve leagues an hour, when fortunately the cable broke, and we lost both the whale and the anchor. However, upon our return to Europe, some months after, we found the same whale within a few leagues of the same spot, floating dead upon the water; it measured above half a mile in length. As we could take but a small quantity of such a monstrous animal on board, we got our boats out, and with much difficulty cut off his head, where, to our great joy, we found the anchor, and above forty fathom of the cable, concealed on the left side of his mouth, just under his tongue. [Perhaps this was the cause of his death, as that side of his tongue was much swelled, with a great degree of inflammation.] This was the only extraordinary circumstance that happened on this voyage. One part of our distress, however, I had like to have forgot: while the whale was running away with the ship she sprung a leak, and the water poured in so fast, that all our pumps could not keep us from sinking; it was, however, my good fortune to discover it first. I found it a large hole about a foot diameter; you will naturally suppose this circumstance gives me infinite pleasure, when I inform you that this noble vessel was preserved, with all its crew, by a most fortunate thought! in short, I sat down over it, and could have dispensed with it had it been larger; nor will you be surprised when I inform you I am descended from Dutch parents. [The Baron's ancestors have but lately settled there; in another part of his adventures he boasts of royal blood.]

My situation, while I sat there, was rather cool, but the carpenter's art soon relieved me.

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