

TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER XIII

A TRIP TO THE NORTH

The Baron sails with Captain Phipps, attacks two large bears, and has a very narrow escape—Gains the confidence of these animals, and then destroys thousands of them; loads the ship with their hams and skins; makes presents of the former, and obtains a general invitation to all city feasts—A dispute between the Captain and the Baron, in which, from motives of politeness, the Captain is suffered to gain his point—The Baron declines the offer of a throne, and an empress into the bargain.

We all remember Captain Phipps's (now Lord Mulgrave) last voyage of discovery to the north. I accompanied the captain, not as an officer, but as a private friend. When we arrived in a high northern latitude I was viewing the objects around me with the telescope which I introduced to your notice in my Gibraltar adventures. I thought I saw two large white bears in violent action upon a body of ice considerably above the masts, and about half a league distance. I immediately took my carbine, slung it across my shoulder, and ascended the ice. When I arrived at the top, the unevenness of the surface made my approach to those animals troublesome and hazardous beyond expression: sometimes hideous cavities opposed me, which I was obliged to spring over; in other parts the surface was as smooth as a mirror, and I was continually falling: as I approached near enough to reach them, I found they were only at play. I immediately began to calculate the value of their skins, for they were each as large as a well-fed ox: unfortunately, at the very instant I was presenting my carbine my right foot slipped, I fell upon my back, and the violence of the blow deprived me totally of my senses for nearly half an hour; however, when I recovered, judge of my surprise at finding one of those large animals I have been just describing had turned me upon my face, and was just laying hold of the waistband of my breeches, which were then new and made of leather: he was certainly going to carry me feet foremost, God knows where, when I took this knife (showing a large clasp knife) out of my side-pocket, made a chop at one of his hind feet, and cut off three of his toes; he immediately let me drop and roared most horribly. I took up my carbine and fired at him as he ran off; he fell directly. The noise of the piece roused several thousand of these white bears, who were asleep upon the ice within half a mile of me; they came immediately to the spot. There was no time to be lost. A most fortunate thought arrived in my pericranium just at that instant. I took off the skin and head of the dead bear in half the time that some people would be in skinning a rabbit, and wrapped myself in it, placing my own head directly under Bruin's; the whole herd came round me immediately, and my apprehensions threw me into a most piteous situation to be sure: however, my scheme turned out a most admirable one for my own safety. They all came smelling, and evidently took me for a brother Bruin; I wanted nothing but bulk to make an excellent counterfeit: however, I saw several cubs amongst them not much larger than myself. After they had all smelt me, and the body of their deceased companion, whose skin was now become my protector, we seemed very sociable, and I found I could mimic all their actions tolerably well; but at growling, roaring, and hugging they were quite my masters. I began now to think that I might turn the general confidence which I had created amongst these animals to my advantage.

I had heard an old army surgeon say a wound in the spine was instant death. I now determined to try the experiment, and had again recourse to my knife, with which I struck the largest in the back of the neck, near the shoulders, but under great apprehensions, not doubting but the creature would, if he survived the stab, tear me to pieces. However, I was remarkably fortunate, for he fell dead at my feet

without making the least noise. I was now resolved to demolish them every one in the same manner, which I accomplished without the least difficulty; for although they saw their companions fall, they had no suspicion of either the cause or the effect. When they all lay dead before me, I felt myself a second Samson, having slain my thousands.

To make short of the story, I went back to the ship, and borrowed three parts of the crew to assist me in skinning them, and carrying the hams on board, which we did in a few hours, and loaded the ship with them. As to the other parts of the animals, they were thrown into the sea, though I doubt not but the whole would eat as well as the legs, were they properly cured.

As soon as we returned I sent some of the hams, in the captain's name, to the Lords of Admiralty, others to the Lords of the Treasury, some to the Lord Mayor and Corporation of London, a few to each of the trading companies, and the remainder to my particular friends, from all of whom I received warm thanks; but from the city I was honoured with substantial notice, viz., an invitation to dine at Guildhall annually on Lord Mayor's day.

The bear-skins I sent to the Empress of Russia, to clothe her majesty and her court in the winter, for which she wrote me a letter of thanks with her own hand, and sent it by an ambassador extraordinary, inviting me to share the honours of her crown; but as I never was ambitious of royal dignity, I declined her majesty's favour in the politest terms. The same ambassador had orders to wait and bring my answer to her majesty *personally*, upon which business he was absent about three months: her majesty's reply convinced me of the strength of her affections, and the dignity of her mind; her late indisposition was entirely owing (as she, kind creature! was pleased to express herself in a late conversation with the Prince Dolgoroucki) to my cruelty. What the sex see in me I cannot conceive, but the Empress is not the only female sovereign who has offered me her hand.

Some people have very illiberally reported that Captain Phipps did not proceed as far as he might have done upon that expedition. Here it becomes my duty to acquit him; our ship was in a very proper trim till I loaded it with such an immense quantity of bear-skins and hams, after which it would have been madness to have attempted to proceed further, as we were now scarcely able to combat a brisk gale, much less those mountains of ice which lay in the higher latitudes.

The captain has since often expressed a dissatisfaction that he had no share in the honours of that day, which he emphatically called *bear-skin day*. He has also been very desirous of knowing by what art I destroyed so many thousands, without fatigue or danger to myself; indeed, he is so ambitious of dividing the glory with me, that we have actually quarrelled about it, and we are not now upon speaking terms. He boldly asserts I had no merit in deceiving the bears, because I was covered with one of their skins; nay, he declares there is not, in his opinion, in Europe, so complete a bear naturally as himself among the human species.

He is now a noble peer, and I am too well acquainted with good manners to dispute so delicate a point with his lordship.

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