

TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER XXXIII

The Baron goes to Petersburg, and converses with the Empress- Persuades the Russians and Turks to cease cutting one another's throats, and in concert cut a canal across the Isthmus of Suez- The Baron discovers the Alexandrine Library, and meets with Hermes Trismegistus- Besieges Seringapatam, and challenges Tippoo Sahib to single combat- They fight- The Baron receives some wounds to his face, but at last vanquishes the tyrant- The Baron returns to Europe, and raises the hull of the "Royal George."

Seized with a fury of canal-cutting, I took it in my head to form an immediate communication between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and therefore set out for Petersburg.

The sanguinary ambition of the Empress would not listen to my proposals, until I took a private opportunity, taking a cup of coffee with her Majesty, to tell her that I would absolutely sacrifice myself for the general good of mankind, and if she would accede to my proposals, would, on the completion of the canal, *ipso facto*, give her my hand in marriage!

"My dear, dear Baron," said she, "I accede to everything you please, and agree to make peace with the Porte on the conditions you mention. And," added she, rising with all the majesty of the Czarina, Empress of half the world, "be it known to all subjects, that We ordain these conditions, for such is our royal will and pleasure."

I now proceeded to the Isthmus of Suez, at the head of a million of Russian pioneers, and there united my forces with a million of Turks, armed with shovels and pickaxes. They did not come to cut each other's throats, but for their mutual interest, to facilitate commerce and civilisation, and pour all the wealth of India by a new channel into Europe. "My brave fellows," said I, "consider the immense labour of the Chinese to build their celebrated wall; think of what superior benefit to mankind is our present undertaking; persevere, and fortune will second your endeavours. Remember it is Munchausen who leads you on, and be convinced of success."

Saying these words, I drove my chariot with all my might in my former track, that vestige mentioned by the Baron de Tott, and when I was advanced considerably, I felt my chariot sinking under me. I attempted to drive on, but the ground, or rather immense vault, giving way, my chariot and all went down precipitately. Stunned by the fall, it was some moments before I could recollect myself, when at length, to my amazement, I perceived myself fallen into the Alexandrine Library, overwhelmed in an ocean of books; thousands of volumes came tumbling on my head amidst the ruins of that part of the vault through which my chariot had descended, and for a time buried my bulls and all beneath a heap of learning. However, I contrived to extricate myself, and advanced with awful admiration through the vast avenues of the library. I perceived on every side innumerable volumes and repositories of ancient learning, and all the science of the Antediluvian world. Here I met with Hermes Trismegistus, and a parcel of old philosophers debating upon the politics and learning of their days. I gave them inexpressible delight in telling them, in a few words, all the discoveries of Newton, and the history of the world since their time. These gentry, on the contrary, told me a thousand stories of antiquity that some of our antiquarians would give their very eyes to hear.

In short, I ordered the library to be preserved, and I intend making a present of it, as soon as it arrives in England, to the Royal Society, together with Hermes Trismegistus, and half a dozen old

philosophers. I have got a beautiful cage made, in which I keep these extraordinary creatures, and feed them with bread and honey, as they seem to believe in a kind of doctrine of transmigration, and will not touch flesh. Hermes Trismegistus especially is a most antique looking being, with a beard half a yard long, covered with a robe of golden embroidery, and prates like a parrot. He will cut a very brilliant figure in the Museum.

Having made a track with my chariot from sea to sea, I ordered my Turks and Russians to begin, and in a few hours we had the pleasure of seeing a fleet of British East Indiamen in full sail through the canal. The officers of this fleet were very polite, and paid me every applause and congratulation my exploits could merit. They told me of their affairs in India, and the ferocity of that dreadful warrior, Tippoo Sahib, on which I resolved to go to India and encounter the tyrant. I travelled down the Red Sea to Madras, and at the head of a few Sepoys and Europeans pursued the flying army of Tippoo to the gates of Seringapatam. I challenged him to mortal combat, and, mounted on my steed, rode up to the walls of the fortress amidst a storm of shells and cannon-balls. As fast as the bombs and cannon-balls came upon me, I caught them in my hands like so many pebbles, and throwing them against the fortress, demolished the strongest ramparts of the place. I took my mark so direct, that whenever I aimed a cannon-ball or a shell at any person on the ramparts I was sure to hit him: and one time perceiving a tremendous piece of artillery pointed against me, and knowing the ball must be so great it would certainly stun me, I took a small cannon-ball, and just as I perceived the engineer going to order them to fire, and opening his mouth to give the word of command, I took aim and drove my ball precisely down his throat.

Tippoo, fearing that all would be lost, that a general and successful storm would ensue if I continued to batter the place, came forth upon his elephant to fight me; I saluted him, and insisted he should fire first.

Tippoo, though a barbarian, was not deficient in politeness, and declined the compliment; upon which I took off my hat, and bowing, told him it was an advantage Munchausen should never be said to accept from so gallant a warrior: on which Tippoo instantly discharged his carbine, the ball from which, hitting my horse's ear, made him plunge with rage and indignation. In return I discharged my pistol at Tippoo, and shot off his turban. He had a small field-piece mounted with him on his elephant, which he then discharged at me, and the grape-shot coming in a shower, rattled in the laurels that covered and shaded me all over, and remained pendant like berries on the branches. I then, advancing, took the proboscis of his elephant, and turning it against the rider, struck him repeatedly with the extremity of it on either side of the head, until I at length dismounted him. Nothing could equal the rage of the barbarian finding himself thrown from his elephant. He rose in a fit of despair, and rushed against my steed and myself: but I scorned to fight him at so great a disadvantage on his side, and directly dismounted to fight him hand to hand. Never did I fight with any man who bore himself more nobly than this adversary; he parried my blows, and dealt home his own in return with astonishing precision. The first blow of his sabre I received upon the bridge of my nose, and but for the bony firmness of that part of my face, it would have descended to my mouth. I still bear the mark upon my nose.

He next made a furious blow at my head, but I, parrying, deadened the force of his sabre, so that I received but one scar on my forehead, and at the same instant, by a blow of my sword, cut off his arm, and his hand and sabre fell to the earth; he tottered for some paces, and dropped at the foot of his elephant. That sagacious animal, seeing the danger of his master, endeavoured to protect him by flourishing his proboscis round the head of the Sultan.

Fearless I advanced against the elephant, desirous to take alive the haughty Tippoo Sahib; but he drew a pistol from his belt, and discharged it full in my face as I rushed upon him, which did me no

further harm than wound my cheek-bone, which disfigures me somewhat under my left eye. I could not withstand the rage and impulse of that moment, and with one blow of my sword separated his head from his body.

I returned overland from India to Europe with admirable velocity, so that the account of Tippoo's defeat by me has not as yet arrived by the ordinary passage, nor can you expect to hear of it for a considerable time. I simply relate the encounter as it happened between the Sultan and me; and if there be any one who doubts the truth of what I say, he is an infidel, and I will fight him at any time and place, and with any weapon he pleases.

Hearing so many persons talk about raising the "Royal George," I began to take pity on that fine old ruin of British plank, and determined to have her up. I was sensible of the failure of the various means hitherto employed for the purpose, and therefore inclined to try a method different from any before attempted. I got an immense balloon, made of the toughest sail-cloth, and having descended in my diving-bell, and properly secured the hull with enormous cables, I ascended to the surface, and fastened my cables to the balloon. Prodigious multitudes were assembled to behold the elevation of the "Royal George," and as soon as I began to fill my balloon with inflammable air the vessel evidently began to move: but when my balloon was completely filled, she carried up the "Royal George" with the greatest rapidity. The vessel appearing on the surface occasioned a universal shout of triumph from the millions assembled on the occasion. Still the balloon continued ascending, trailing the hull after like a lantern at the tail of a kite, and in a few minutes appeared floating among the clouds.

It was then the opinion of many philosophers that it would be more difficult to get her down than it had been to draw her up. But I convinced them to the contrary by taking my aim so exactly with a twelve-pounder, that I brought her down in an instant.

I considered, that if I should break the balloon with a cannon-ball while she remained with the vessel over the land, the fall would inevitable occasion the destruction of the hull, and which, in its fall, might crush some of the multitude; therefore I thought it safer to take my aim when the balloon was over the sea, and pointing my twelve-pounder, drove the ball right through the balloon, on which the inflammable air rushed out with great force, and the "Royal George" descended like a falling star into the very spot from whence she had been taken. There she still remains, and I have convinced all Europe of the possibility of taking her up.

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