

Bangs John Kendrick

Mr. Munchausen



John Bangs
Mr. Munchausen

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**Bangs John Kendrick
Mr. Munchausen / Being a True Account of
Some of the Recent Adventures beyond the
Styx of the Late Hieronymus Carl Friedrich,
Sometime Baron Munchausen of Bodenwerder**

EDITOR'S APOLOGY

and

DEDICATION

In order that there may be no misunderstanding as to the why and the wherefore of this collection of tales it appears to me to be desirable that I should at the outset state my reasons for acting as the medium between the spirit of the late Baron Munchausen and the reading public. In common with a large number of other great men in history Baron Munchausen has suffered because he is not understood. I have observed with wondering surprise the steady and constant growth of the idea that Baron Munchausen was not a man of truth; that his statements of fact were untrustworthy, and that as a realist he had no standing whatsoever. Just how this misconception of the man's character has arisen it would be difficult to say. Surely in his published writings he shows that same lofty resolve to be true to life as he has seen it that characterises the work of some of the high Apostles of Realism, who are writing of the things that will teach future generations how we of to-day ordered our goings-on. The note of veracity in Baron Munchausen's early literary venturings rings as clear and as true certainly as the similar note in the charming studies of Manx Realism that have come to us of late years from the pen of Mr. Corridor Walkingstick, of Gloomster Abbey and London. We all remember the glow of satisfaction with which we read Mr. Walkingstick's great story of the love of the clergyman, John Stress, for the charming little heroine, Glory Partridge. Here was something at last that rang true. The picture was painted in the boldest of colours, and, regardless of consequences to himself, Mr. Walkingstick dared to be real when he might have given rein to his imagination. Mr. Walkingstick was, thereupon, lifted up by popular favour to the level of an apostle – nay, he even admitted the soft impeachment – and now as a moral teacher he is without a rival in the world of literature. Yet the same age that accepts this man as a moral teacher, rejects Baron Munchausen, who, in different manner perhaps, presented to the world as true and life-like a picture of the conditions of his day as that given to us by Mr. Walkingstick in his deservedly popular romance, “Episcopalians I have Met.” Of course, I do not claim that Baron Munchausen's stories in bulk or in specified instances, have the literary vigour that is so marked a quality of the latter-day writer, but the point I do wish to urge is that to accept the one as a veracious chronicler of his time and to reject the other as one who indulges his pen in all sorts of grotesque vagaries, without proper regard for the facts, is a great injustice to the man of other times. The question arises, *why* is this? How has this wrong upon the worthy realist of the eighteenth century been perpetrated? Is it an intentional or an unwitting wrong? I prefer to believe that it is based upon ignorance of the Baron's true quality, due to the fact that his works are rarely to be found within the reach of the public: in some cases, because of the failure of librarians to

comprehend his real motives, his narratives are excluded from Public and Sunday-School libraries; and because of their extreme age, they are not easily again brought into vogue. I have, therefore, accepted the office of intermediary between the Baron and the readers of the present day, in order that his later work, which, while it shows to a marked degree the decadence of his literary powers, may yet serve to demonstrate to the readers of my own time how favourably he compares with some of the literary idols of to-day, in the simple matter of fidelity to fact. If these stories which follow shall serve to rehabilitate Baron Munchausen as a lover and practitioner of the arts of Truth, I shall not have made the sacrifice of my time in vain. If they fail of this purpose I shall still have the satisfaction of knowing that I have tried to render a service to an honest and defenceless man.

Meanwhile I dedicate this volume, with sentiments of the highest regard, to that other great realist

MR. CORRIDOR WALKINGSTICK

of

GLOOMSTER ABBEY

J. K. B

I

I ENCOUNTER THE OLD GENTLEMAN

There are moments of supreme embarrassment in the lives of persons given to veracity, – indeed it has been my own unusual experience in life that the truth well stuck to is twice as hard a proposition as a lie so obvious that no one is deceived by it at the outset. I cannot quite agree with my friend, Caddy Barlow, who says that in a tight place it is better to lie at once and be done with it than to tell the truth which will need forty more truths to explain it, but I must confess that in my forty years of absolute and conscientious devotion to truth I have found myself in holes far deeper than any my most mendacious of friends ever got into. I do not propose, however, to desert at this late hour the Goddess I have always worshipped because she leads me over a rough and rocky road, and whatever may be the hardships involved in my wooing I intend to the very end to remain the ever faithful slave of Mademoiselle Veracité. All of which I state here in prefatory mood, and in order, in so far as it is possible for me to do so, to disarm the incredulous and sniffy reader who may be inclined to doubt the truth of my story of how the manuscript of the following pages came into my possession. I am quite aware that to some the tale will appear absolutely and intolerably impossible. I know that if any other than I told it to me I should not believe it. Yet despite these drawbacks the story is in all particulars, essential and otherwise, absolutely truthful.

The facts are briefly these:

It was not, to begin with, a dark and dismal evening. The snow was not falling silently, clothing a sad and gloomy world in a mantle of white, and over the darkling moor a heavy mist was not rising, as is so frequently the case. There was no soul-stirring moaning of bitter winds through the leafless boughs; so far as I was aware nothing sougled within twenty miles of my bailiwick; and my dog, lying before a blazing log fire in my library, did not give forth an occasional growl of apprehension, denoting the presence or approach of an uncanny visitor from other and mysterious realms: and for two good reasons. The first reason is that it was midsummer when the thing happened, so that a blazing log fire in my library would have been an extravagance as well as an anachronism. The second is that I have no dog. In fact there was nothing unusual, or uncanny in the whole experience. It happened to be a bright and somewhat too sunny July day, which is not an unusual happening along the banks of the Hudson. You could see the heat, and if anything had sougled it could only have been the mercury in my thermometer. This I must say clicked nervously against the top of the glass tube and manifested an extraordinary desire to climb higher than the length of the tube permitted. Incidentally I may add, even if it be not believed, that the heat was so intense that the mercury actually did raise the whole thermometer a foot and a half above the mantel-shelf, and for two mortal hours, from midday until two by the Monastery Clock, held it suspended there in mid-air with no visible means of support. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the only sounds heard were the expanding creaks of the beams of my house, which upon that particular day increased eight feet in width and assumed a height which made it appear to be a three instead of a two story dwelling. There was little work doing in the house. The children played about in their bathing suits, and the only other active factor in my life of the moment was our hired man who was kept busy in the cellar pouring water on the furnace coal to keep it from spontaneously combusting.

We had just had luncheon, burning our throats with the iced tea and with considerable discomfort swallowing the simmering cold roast filet, which we had to eat hastily before the heat of the day transformed it into smoked beef. My youngest boy Willie perspired so copiously that we seriously thought of sending for a plumber to solder up his pores, and as for myself who have spent three summers of my life in the desert of Sahara in order to rid myself of nervous chills to which I

was once unhappily subject, for the first time in my life I was impelled to admit that it was intolerably warm. And then the telephone bell rang.

“Great Scott!” I cried, “Who in thunder do you suppose wants to play golf on a day like this?” – for nowadays our telephone is used for no other purpose than the making or the breaking of golf engagements.

“Me,” cried my eldest son, whose grammar is not as yet on a par with his activity. “I’ll go.”

The boy shot out of the dining room and ran to the telephone, returning in a few moments with the statement that a gentleman with a husky voice whose name was none of his business wished to speak with me on a matter of some importance to myself.

I was loath to go. My friends the book agents had recently acquired the habit of approaching me over the telephone, and I feared that here was another nefarious attempt to foist a thirty-eight volume tabloid edition of *The World’s Worst Literature* upon me. Nevertheless I wisely determined to respond.

“Hello,” I said, placing my lips against the rubber cup. “Hello there, who wants 91162 Nepperhan?”

“Is that you?” came the answering question, and, as my boy had indicated, in a voice whose chief quality was huskiness.

“I guess so,” I replied facetiously; – “It was this morning, but the heat has affected me somewhat, and I don’t feel as much like myself as I might. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing, but you can do a lot for yourself,” was the astonishing answer. “Pretty hot for literary work, isn’t it?” the voice added sympathetically.

“Very,” said I. “Fact is I can’t seem to do anything these days but perspire.”

“That’s what I thought; and when you can’t work ruin stares you in the face, eh? Now I have a manuscript – ”

“Oh Lord!” I cried. “Don’t. There are millions in the same fix. Even my cook writes.”

“Don’t know about that,” he returned instantly. “But I do know that there’s millions in my manuscript. And you can have it for the asking. How’s that for an offer?”

“Very kind, thank you,” said I. “What’s the nature of your story?”

“It’s extremely good-natured,” he answered promptly.

I laughed. The twist amused me.

“That isn’t what I meant exactly,” said I, “though it has some bearing on the situation. Is it a Henry James dandy, or does it bear the mark of Caine? Is it realism or fiction?”

“Realism,” said he. “Fiction isn’t in my line.”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” I replied; “you send it to me by post and I’ll look it over. If I can use it I will.”

“Can’t do it,” said he. “There isn’t any post-office where I am.”

“What?” I cried. “No post-office? Where in Hades are you?”

“Gehenna,” he answered briefly. “The transportation between your country and mine is all one way,” he added. “If it wasn’t the population here would diminish.”

“Then how the deuce am I to get hold of your stuff?” I demanded.

“That’s easy. Send your stenographer to the ’phone and I’ll dictate it,” he answered.

The novelty of the situation appealed to me. Even if my new found acquaintance were some funny person nearer at hand than Gehenna trying to play a practical joke upon me, still it might be worth while to get hold of the story he had to tell. Hence I agreed to his proposal.

“All right, sir,” said I. “I’ll do it. I’ll have him here to-morrow morning at nine o’clock sharp. What’s your number? I’ll ring you up.”

“Never mind that,” he replied. “I’m merely a tapster on your wires. I’ll ring *you* up as soon as I’ve had breakfast and then we can get to work.”

“Very good,” said I. “And may I ask your name?”

“Certainly,” he answered. “I’m Munchausen.”

“What? The Baron?” I roared, delighted.

“Well – I used to be Baron,” he returned with a tinge of sadness in his voice, “but here in Gehenna we are all on an equal footing. I’m plain Mr. Munchausen of Hades now. But that’s a detail. Don’t forget. Nine o’clock. Good-bye.”

“Wait a moment, Baron,” I cried. “How about the royalties on this book?”

“Keep ’em for yourself,” he replied. “We have money to burn over here. You are welcome to all the earthly rights of the book. I’m satisfied with the returns on the Asbestos Edition, already in its 468th thousand. Good-bye.”

There was a rattle as of the hanging up of the receiver, a short sharp click and a ring, and I realised that he had gone.

The next morning in response to a telegraphic summons my stenographer arrived and when I explained the situation to him he was incredulous, but orders were orders and he remained. I could see, however, that as nine o’clock approached he grew visibly nervous, which indicated that he half believed me anyhow, and when at nine to the second the sharp ring of the ’phone fell upon our ears he jumped as if he had been shot.

“Hello,” said I again. “That you, Baron?”

“The same,” the voice replied. “Stenographer ready?”

“Yes,” said I.

The stenographer walked to the desk, placed the receiver at his ear, and with trembling voice announced his presence. There was a response of some kind, and then more calmly he remarked, “Fire ahead, Mr. Munchausen,” and began to write rapidly in short-hand.

Two days later he handed me a type-written copy of the following stories. The reader will observe that they are in the form of interviews, and it should be stated here that they appeared originally in the columns of the Sunday edition of the *Gehenna Gazette*, a publication of Hades which circulates wholly among the best people of that country, and which, if report saith truly, would not print a line which could not be placed in the hands of children, and to whose columns such writers as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Jonah and Ananias are frequent contributors.

Indeed, on the statement of Mr. Munchausen, all the interviews herein set forth were between himself as the principal and the Hon. Henry B. Ananias as reporter, or were scrupulously edited by the latter before being published.

II

THE SPORTING TOUR OF MR. MUNCHAUSEN

“Good morning, Mr. Munchausen,” said the interviewer of the *Gehenna Gazette* entering the apartment of the famous traveller at the Hotel Deville, where the late Baron had just arrived from his sporting tour in the Blue Hills of Cimmeria and elsewhere.

“The interests of truth, my dear Ananias,” replied the Baron, grasping me cordially by the hand, “require that I should state it as my opinion that it is not a good morning. In fact, my good friend, it is a very bad morning. Can you not see that it is raining cats and dogs without?”

“Sir,” said I with a bow, “I accept the spirit of your correction but not the letter. It is raining indeed, sir, as you suggest, but having passed through it myself on my way hither I can personally testify that it is raining rain, and not a single cat or canine has, to my knowledge, as yet fallen from the clouds to the parched earth, although I am informed that down upon the coast an elephant and three cows have fallen upon one of the summer hotels and irreparably damaged the roof.”

Mr. Munchausen laughed.

“It is curious, Ananias,” said he, “what sticklers for the truth you and I have become.”

“It is indeed, Munchausen,” I returned. “The effects of this climate are working wonders upon us. And it is just as well. You and I are outclassed by these twentieth century prevaricators concerning whom late arrivals from the upper world tell such strange things. They tell me that lying has become a business and is no longer ranked among the Arts or Professions.”

“Ah me!” sighed the Baron with a retrospective look in his eye, “lying isn’t what it used to be, Ananias, in your days and mine. I fear it has become one of the lost arts.”

“I have noticed it myself, my friend, and only last night I observed the same thing to my well beloved Sapphira, who was lamenting the transparency of the modern lie, and said that lying to-day is no better than the truth. In our day a prevarication had all of the opaque beauty of an opalescent bit of glass, whereas to-day in the majority of cases it is like a great vulgar plate-glass window, through which we can plainly see the ugly truths that lie behind. But, sir, I am here to secure from you not a treatise upon the lost art of lying, but some idea of the results of your sporting tour. You fished, and hunted, and golfed, and doubtless did other things. You, of course, had luck and made the greatest catch of the season; shot all the game in sight, and won every silver, gold and pewter golf mug in all creation?”

“You speak truly, Ananias,” returned Mr. Munchausen. “My luck *was* wonderful – even for one who has been so singularly fortunate as I. I took three tons of speckled beauties with one cast of an ordinary horse whip in the Blue Hills, and with nothing but a silken line and a minnow hook landed upon the deck of my steam yacht a whale of most tremendous proportions; I shot game of every kind in great abundance and in my golf there was none to whom I could not give with ease seven holes in every nine and beat him out.”

“Seven?” said I, failing to see how the ex-Baron could be right.

“Seven,” said he complacently. “Seven on the first, and seven on the second nine; fourteen in all of the eighteen holes.”

“But,” I cried, “I do not see how that could be. With fourteen holes out of the eighteen given to your opponent even if you won all the rest you still would be ten down.”

“True, by ordinary methods of calculation,” returned the Baron, “but I got them back on a technicality, which I claim is a new and valuable discovery in the game. You see it is impossible to play more than one hole at a time, and I invariably proved to the Greens Committee that in taking fourteen holes at once my opponent violated the physical possibilities of the situation. In every case

the point was accepted as well taken, for if we allow golfers to rise above physical possibilities the game is gone. The integrity of the Card is the soul of Golf,” he added sententiously.

“Tell me of the whale,” said I, simply. “You landed a whale of large proportions on the deck of your yacht with a simple silken line and a minnow hook.”

“Well it’s a tough story,” the Baron replied, handing me a cigar. “But it is true, Ananias, true to the last word. I was fishing for eels. Sitting on the deck of *The Lyre* one very warm afternoon in the early stages of my trip, I baited a minnow hook and dropped it overboard. It was the roughest day at sea I had ever encountered. The waves were mountain high, and it is the sad fact that one of our crew seated in the main-top was drowned with the spray of the dashing billows. Fortunately for myself, directly behind my deck chair, to which I was securely lashed, was a powerful electric fan which blew the spray away from me, else I too might have suffered the same horrid fate. Suddenly there came a tug on my line. I was half asleep at the time and let the line pay out involuntarily, but I was wide-awake enough to know that something larger than an eel had taken hold of the hook. I had hooked either a Leviathan or a derelict. Caution and patience, the chief attributes of a good angler were required. I hauled the line in until it was taut. There were a thousand yards of it out, and when it reached the point of tensity, I gave orders to the engineers to steam closer to the object at the other end. We steamed in five hundred yards, I meanwhile hauling in my line. Then came another tug and I let out ten yards. ‘Steam closer,’ said I. ‘Three hundred yards sou-sou-west by nor’-east.’ The yacht obeyed on the instant. I called the Captain and let him feel the line. ‘What do you think it is?’ said I. He pulled a half dozen times. ‘Feels like a snag,’ he said, ‘but seein’ as there ain’t no snags out here, I think it must be a fish.’ ‘What kind?’ I asked. I could not but agree that he was better acquainted with the sea and its denizens than I. ‘Well,’ he replied, ‘it is either a sea serpent or a whale.’ At the mere mention of the word whale I was alert. I have always wanted to kill a whale. ‘Captain,’ said I, ‘can’t you tie an anchor onto a hawser, and bait the flukes with a boa constrictor and make sure of him?’ He looked at me contemptuously. ‘Whales eats fish,’ said he, ‘and they don’t bite at no anchors. Whales has brains, whales has.’ ‘What shall we do?’ I asked. ‘Steam closer,’ said the Captain, and we did so.”

Munchausen took a long breath and for the moment was silent.

“Well?” said I.

“Well, Ananias,” said he. “We resolved to wait. As the Captain said to me, ‘Fishin’ is waitin’.’ So we waited. ‘Coax him along,’ said the Captain. ‘How can we do it?’ I asked. ‘By kindness,’ said he. ‘Treat him gently, persuasive-like and he’ll come.’ We waited four days and nobody moved and I grew weary of coaxing. ‘We’ve got to do something,’ said I to the Captain. ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘Let’s *make* him move. He doesn’t seem to respond to kindness.’ ‘But how?’ I cried. ‘Give him an electric shock,’ said the Captain. ‘Telegraph him his mother’s sick and may be it’ll move him.’ ‘Can’t you get closer to him?’ I demanded, resenting his facetious manner. ‘I can, but it will scare him off,’ replied the Captain. So we turned all our batteries on the sea. The dynamo shot forth its bolts and along about four o’clock in the afternoon there was the whale drawn by magnetic influence to the side of *The Lyre*. He was a beauty, Ananias,” Munchausen added with enthusiasm. “You never saw such a whale. His back was as broad as the deck of an ocean steamer and in his length he exceeded the dimensions of *The Lyre* by sixty feet.”

“And still you got him on deck?” I asked, – I, Ananias, who can stand something in the way of an exaggeration.

“Yes,” said Munchausen, lighting his cigar, which had gone out. “Another storm came up and we rolled and rolled and rolled, until I thought *The Lyre* was going to capsize.”

“But weren’t you sea-sick?” I asked.

“Didn’t have a chance to be,” said Munchausen. “I was thinking of the whale all the time. Finally there came a roll in which we went completely under, and with a slight pulling on the line the whale was landed by the force of the wave and laid squarely upon the deck.”

“Great Sapphira!” said I. “But you just said he was wider and longer than the yacht!”

“He was,” sighed Munchausen. “He landed on the deck and by sheer force of his weight the yacht went down under him. I swam ashore and the whole crew with me. The next day Mr. Whale floated in strangled. He’d swallowed the thousand yards of line and it got so tangled in his tonsils that it choked him to death. Come around next week and I’ll give you a couple of pounds of whalebone for Mrs. Ananias, and all the oil you can carry.”

I thanked the old gentleman for his kind offer and promised to avail myself of it, although as a newspaper man it is against my principles to accept gifts from public men.

“It was great luck, Baron,” said I. “Or at least it would have been if you hadn’t lost your yacht.”

“That was great luck too,” he observed nonchalantly. “It cost me ten thousand dollars a month keeping that yacht in commission. Now she’s gone I save all that. Why it’s like finding money in the street, Ananias. She wasn’t worth more than fifty thousand dollars, and in six months I’ll be ten thousand ahead.”

I could not but admire the cheerful philosophy of the man, but then I was not surprised. Munchausen was never the sort of man to let little things worry him.

“But that whale business wasn’t a circumstance to my catch of three tons of trout with a single cast of a horse-whip in the Blue Hills,” said the Baron after a few moments of meditation, during which I could see that he was carefully marshalling his facts.

“I never heard of its equal,” said I. “You must have used a derrick.”

“No,” he replied suavely. “Nothing of the sort. It was the simplest thing in the world. It was along about five o’clock in the afternoon when with my three guides and my valet I drove up the winding roadway of Great Sulphur Mountain on my way to the Blue Mountain House where I purposed to put up for a few days. I had one of those big mountain wagons with a covered top to it such as the pioneers used on the American plains, with six fine horses to the fore. I held the reins myself, since we were in the midst of a terrific thunderstorm and I felt safer when I did my own driving. All the flaps of the leathern cover were let down at the sides and at the back, and were securely fastened. The roads were unusually heavy, and when we came to the last great hill before the lake all but I were walking, as a measure of relief to the horses. Suddenly one of the horses balked right in the middle of the ascent, and in a moment of impatience I gave him a stinging flick with my whip, when like a whirlwind the whole six swerved to one side and started on a dead run upward. The jolt and the unexpected swerving of the wagon threw me from my seat and I landed clear of the wheels in the soft mud of the roadway, fortunately without injury. When I arose the team was out of sight and we had to walk the remainder of the distance to the hotel. Imagine our surprise upon arriving there to find the six panting steeds and the wagon standing before the main entrance to the hotel dripping as though they had been through the Falls of Niagara, and, would you believe it, Ananias, inside that leather cover of the wagon, packed as tightly as sardines, were no less than three thousand trout, not one of them weighing less than a pound and some of them getting as high as four. The whole catch weighed a trifle over six thousand pounds.”

“Great Heavens, Baron,” I cried. “Where the dickens did they come from?”

“That’s what I asked myself,” said the Baron easily. “It seemed astounding at first glance, but investigation showed it after all to be a very simple proposition. The runaways after reaching the top of the hill turned to the left, and clattered on down toward the bridge over the inlet to the lake. The bridge broke beneath their weight and the horses soon found themselves struggling in the water. The harness was strong and the wagon never left them. They had to swim for it, and I am told by a small boy who was fishing on the lake at the time that they swam directly across it, pulling the wagon after them. Naturally with its open front and confined back and sides the wagon acted as a sort of dragnet and when the opposite shore was gained, and the wagon was pulled ashore, it was found to have gathered in all the fish that could not get out of the way.”

The Baron resumed his cigar, and I sat still eyeing the ample pattern of the drawing-room carpet.

“Pretty good catch for an afternoon, eh?” he said in a minute.

“Yes,” said I. “Almost too good, Baron. Those horses must have swam like the dickens to get over so quickly. You would think the trout would have had time to escape.”

“Oh I presume one or two of them did,” said Munchausen. “But the majority of them couldn’t. The horses were all fast, record-breakers anyhow. I never hire a horse that isn’t.”

And with that I left the old gentleman and walked blushing back to the office. I don’t doubt for an instant the truth of the Baron’s story, but somehow or other I feel that in writing it my reputation is in some measure at stake.

Note – Mr. Munchausen, upon request of the Editor of the *Gehenna Gazette* to write a few stories of adventure for his Imp’s page, conducted by Sapphira, contributed the tales which form the substance of several of the following chapters.

III

THREE MONTHS IN A BALLOON

Mr. Munchausen was not handsome, but the Imps liked him very much, he was so full of wonderful reminiscences, and was always willing to tell anybody that would listen, all about himself. To the Heavenly Twins he was the greatest hero that had ever lived. Napoleon Bonaparte, on Mr. Munchausen's own authority, was not half the warrior that he, the late Baron had been, nor was Cæsar in his palmiest days, one-quarter so wise or so brave. How old the Baron was no one ever knew, but he had certainly lived long enough to travel the world over, and stare every kind of death squarely in the face without flinching. He had fought Zulus, Indians, tigers, elephants – in fact, everything that fights, the Baron had encountered, and in every contest he had come out victorious. He was the only man the children had ever seen that had lost three legs in battle and then had recovered them after the fight was over; he was the only visitor to their house that had been lost in the African jungle and wandered about for three months without food or shelter, and best of all he was, on his own confession, the most truthful narrator of extraordinary tales living. The youngsters had to ask the Baron a question only, any one, it mattered not what it was – to start him off on a story of adventure, and as he called upon the Twins' father once a month regularly, the children were not long in getting together a collection of tales beside which the most exciting episodes in history paled into insignificant commonplaces.

“Uncle Munch,” said the Twins one day, as they climbed up into the visitor's lap and disarranged his necktie, “was you ever up in a balloon?”

“Only once,” said the Baron calmly. “But I had enough of it that time to last me for a lifetime.”

“Was you in it for long?” queried the Twins, taking the Baron's watch out of his pocket and flinging it at Cerberus, who was barking outside of the window.

“Well, it seemed long enough,” the Baron answered, putting his pocket-book in the inside pocket of his vest where the Twins could not reach it. “Three months off in the country sleeping all day long and playing tricks all night seems a very short time, but three months in a balloon and the constant centre of attack from every source is too long for comfort.”

“Were you up in the air for three whole months?” asked the Twins, their eyes wide open with astonishment.

“All but two days,” said the Baron. “For two of those days we rested in the top of a tree in India. The way of it was this: I was always, as you know, a great favourite with the Emperor Napoleon, of France, and when he found himself involved in a war with all Europe, he replied to one of his courtiers who warned him that his army was not in condition: ‘Any army is prepared for war whose commander-in-chief numbers Baron Munchausen among his advisers. Let me have Munchausen at my right hand and I will fight the world.’ So they sent for me and as I was not very busy I concluded to go and assist the French, although the allies and I were also very good friends. I reasoned it out this way: In this fight the allies are the stronger. They do not need me. Napoleon does. Fight for the weak, Munchausen, I said to myself, and so I went. Of course, when I reached Paris I went at once to the Emperor's palace and remained at his side until he took the field, after which I remained behind for a few days to put things to rights for the Imperial family. Unfortunately for the French, the King of Prussia heard of my delay in going to the front, and he sent word to his forces to intercept me on my way to join Napoleon at all hazards, and this they tried to do. When I was within ten miles of the Emperor's headquarters, I was stopped by the Prussians, and had it not been that I had provided myself with a balloon for just such an emergency, I should have been captured and confined in the King's palace at Berlin, until the war was over.

“Foreseeing all this, I had brought with me a large balloon packed away in a secret section of my trunk, and while my body-guard was fighting with the Prussian troops sent to capture me, I and

my valet inflated the balloon, jumped into the car and were soon high up out of the enemy's reach. They fired several shots at us, and one of them would have pierced the balloon had I not, by a rare good shot, fired my own rifle at the bullet, and hitting it squarely in the middle, as is my custom, diverted it from its course, and so saved our lives.

"It had been my intention to sail directly over the heads of the attacking party and drop down into Napoleon's camp the next morning, but unfortunately for my calculations, a heavy wind came up in the night and the balloon was caught by a northerly blast, and blown into Africa, where, poised in the air directly over the desert of Sahara, we encountered a dead calm, which kept us stalled up for two miserable weeks."

"Why didn't you come down?" asked the Twins, "wasn't the elevator running?"

"We didn't dare," explained the Baron, ignoring the latter part of the question. "If we had we'd have wasted a great deal of our gas, and our condition would have been worse than ever. As I told you we were directly over the centre of the desert. There was no way of getting out of it except by long and wearisome marches over the hot, burning sands with the chances largely in favour of our never getting out alive. The only thing to do was to stay just where we were and wait for a favouring breeze. This we did, having to wait four mortal weeks before the air was stirred."

"You said two weeks a minute ago, Uncle Munch," said the Twins critically.

"Two? Hem! Well, yes it was two, now that I think of it. It's a natural mistake," said the Baron stroking his mustache a little nervously. "You see two weeks in a balloon over a vast desert of sand, with nothing to do but whistle for a breeze, is equal to four weeks anywhere else. That is, it seems so. Anyhow, two weeks or four, whichever it was, the breeze came finally, and along about midnight left us stranded again directly over an Arab encampment near Wady Halfa. It was a more perilous position really, than the first, because the moment the Arabs caught sight of us they began to make frantic efforts to get us down. At first we simply laughed them to scorn and made faces at them, because as far as we could see, we were safely out of reach. This enraged them and they apparently made up their minds to kill us if they could. At first their idea was to get us down alive and sell us as slaves, but our jeers changed all that, and what should they do but whip out a lot of guns and begin to pepper us.

"I'll settle them in a minute," I said to myself, and set about loading my own gun. Would you believe it, I found that my last bullet was the one with which I had saved the balloon from the Prussian shot?"

"Mercy, how careless of you, Uncle Munch!" said one of the Twins. "What did you do?"

"I threw out a bag of sand ballast so that the balloon would rise just out of range of their guns, and then, as their bullets got to their highest point and began to drop back, I reached out and caught them in a dipper. Rather neat idea, eh? With these I loaded my own rifle and shot every one of the hostile party with their own ammunition, and when the last of the attacking Arabs dropped I found there were enough bullets left to fill the empty sand bag again, so that the lost ballast was not missed. In fact, there were enough of them in weight to bring the balloon down so near to the earth that our anchor rope dangled directly over the encampment, so that my valet and I, without wasting any of our gas, could climb down and secure all the magnificent treasures in rugs and silks and rare jewels these robbers of the desert had managed to get together in the course of their depredations. When these were placed in the car another breeze came up, and for the rest of the time we drifted idly about in the heavens waiting for a convenient place to land. In this manner we were blown hither and yon for three months over land and sea, and finally we were wrecked upon a tall tree in India, whence we escaped by means of a convenient elephant that happened to come our way, upon which we rode triumphantly into Calcutta. The treasures we had secured from the Arabs, unfortunately, we had to leave behind us in the tree, where I suppose they still are. I hope some day to go back and find them."

Here Mr. Munchausen paused for a moment to catch his breath. Then he added with a sigh. "Of course, I went back to France immediately, but by the time I reached Paris the war was over,

and the Emperor was in exile. I was too late to save him – though I think if he had lived some sixty or seventy years longer I should have managed to restore his throne, and Imperial splendour to him.”

The Twins gazed into the fire in silence for a minute or two. Then one of them asked:

“But what did you live on all that time, Uncle Munch?”

“Eggs,” said the Baron. “Eggs and occasionally fish. My servant had had the foresight when getting the balloon ready to include, among the things put into the car, a small coop in which were six pet chickens I owned, and without which I never went anywhere. These laid enough eggs every day to keep us alive. The fish we caught when our balloon stood over the sea, baiting our anchor with pieces of rubber gas pipe used to inflate the balloon, and which looked very much like worms.”

“But the chickens?” said the Twins. “What did they live on?”

The Baron blushed.

“I am sorry you asked that question,” he said, his voice trembling somewhat. “But I’ll answer it if you promise never to tell anyone. It was the only time in my life that I ever practised an intentional deception upon any living thing, and I have always regretted it, although our very lives depended upon it.”

“What was it, Uncle Munch?” asked the Twins, awed to think that the old warrior had ever deceived anyone.

“I took the egg shells and ground them into powder, and fed them to the chickens. The poor creatures supposed it was corn-meal they were getting,” confessed the Baron. “I know it was mean, but what could I do?”

“Nothing,” said the Twins softly. “And we don’t think it was so bad of you after all. Many another person would have kept them laying eggs until they starved, and then he’d have killed them and eaten them up. You let them live.”

“That may be so,” said the Baron, with a smile that showed how relieved his conscience was by the Twins’ suggestion. “But I couldn’t do that you know, because they were pets. I had been brought up from childhood with those chickens.”

Then the Twins, jamming the Baron’s hat down over his eyes, climbed down from his lap and went to their play, strongly of the opinion that, though a bold warrior, the Baron was a singularly kind, soft-hearted man after all.

IV

SOME HUNTING STORIES FOR CHILDREN

The Heavenly Twins had been off in the mountains during their summer holiday, and in consequence had seen very little of their good old friend, Mr. Munchausen. He had written them once or twice, and they had found his letters most interesting, especially that one in which he told how he had killed a moose up in Maine with his Waterbury watch spring, and I do not wonder that they marvelled at that, for it was one of the most extraordinary happenings in the annals of the chase. It seems, if his story is to be believed, and I am sure that none of us who know him has ever had any reason to think that he would deceive intentionally; it seems, I say, that he had gone to Maine for a week's sport with an old army acquaintance of his, who had now become a guide in that region. Unfortunately his rifle, of which he was very fond, and with which his aim was unerring, was in some manner mislaid on the way, and when they arrived in the woods they were utterly without weapons; but Mr. Munchausen was not the man to be daunted by any such trifle as that, particularly while his friend had an old army musket, a relic of the war, stored away in the attic of his woodland domicile.

"Th' only trouble with that ar musket," said the old guide, "ain't so much that she won't shoot straight, nor that she's got a kick onto her like an unbroke mule. What I'm most afeard 'on about your shootin' with her ain't that I think she'll bust neither, for the fact is we ain't got nothin' for to bust her with, seein' as how ammynition is skeerce. I got powder, an' I got waddin', but I ain't got no shot."

"That doesn't make any difference," the Baron replied. "We can make the shot. Have you got any plumbing in the camp? If you have, rip it out, and I'll melt up a water-pipe into bullets."

"No, sir," retorted the old man. "Plumbin' is one of the things I came here to escape from."

"Then," said the Baron, "I'll use my watch for ammunition. It is only a three-dollar watch and I can spare it."

With this determination, Mr. Munchausen took his watch to pieces, an ordinary time-piece of the old-fashioned kind, and, to make a long story short, shot for several days with the component parts of that useful affair rammed down into the barrel of the old musket. With the stem-winding ball he killed an eagle; with pieces of the back cover chopped up to a fineness of medium-sized shot he brought down several other birds, but the great feat of all was when he started for moose with nothing but the watch-spring in the barrel of the gun. Having rolled it up as tight as he could, fastened it with a piece of twine, and rammed it well into the gun, he set out to find the noble animal upon whose life he had designs. After stalking the woods for several hours, he came upon the tracks which told him that his prey was not far off, and in a short while he caught sight of a magnificent creature, his huge antlers held proudly up and his great eyes full of defiance.

For a moment the Baron hesitated. The idea of destroying so beautiful an animal seemed to be abhorrent to his nature, which, warrior-like as he is, has something of the tenderness of a woman about it. A second glance at the superb creature, however, changed all that, for the Baron then saw that to shoot to kill was necessary, for the beast was about to force a fight in which the hunter himself would be put upon the defensive.

"I won't shoot you through the head, my beauty," he said, softly, "nor will I puncture your beautiful coat with this load of mine, but I'll kill you in a new way."

With this he pulled the trigger. The powder exploded, the string binding the long black spring into a coil broke, and immediately the strip of steel shot forth into the air, made directly toward the neck of the rushing moose, and coiling its whole sinuous length tightly about the doomed creature's throat strangled him to death.

As the Twins' father said, a feat of that kind entitled the Baron to a high place in fiction at least, if not in history itself. The Twins were very much wrought up over the incident, particularly,

when one too-smart small imp who was spending the summer at the same hotel where they were said that he didn't believe it, – but he was an imp who had never seen a cheap watch, so how should he know anything about what could be done with a spring that cannot be wound up by a great strong man in less than ten minutes?

As for the Baron he was very modest about the achievement, for when he first appeared at the Twins' home after their return he had actually forgotten all about it, and, in fact, could not recall the incident at all, until Diavolo brought him his own letter, when, of course, the whole matter came back to him.

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