

TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER XIV

Our Baron excels Baron Tott beyond all comparison, yet fails in part of his attempt—Gets into disgrace with the Grand Signior, who orders his head to be cut off—Escapes, and gets on board a vessel, in which he is carried to Venice—Baron Tott's origin, with some account of that great man's parents—Pope Ganganelli's amour—His Holiness fond of shell-fish.

Baron de Tott, in his Memoirs, makes as great a parade of a single act as many travellers whose whole lives have been spent in seeing the different parts of the globe; for my part, if I had been blown from Europe to Asia from the mouth of a cannon, I should have boasted less of it afterwards than he has done of only firing off a Turkish piece of ordnance. What he says of this wonderful gun, as near as my memory will serve me, is this:—"The Turks had placed below the castle, and near the city, on the banks of Simois, a celebrated river, an enormous piece of ordnance cast in brass, which would carry a marble ball of eleven hundred pounds weight. I was inclined," says Tott, "to fire it, but I was willing first to judge of its effect; the crowd about me trembled at this proposal, as they asserted it would overthrow not only the castle, but the city also; at length their fears in part subsided, and I was permitted to discharge it. It required not less than three hundred and thirty pounds' weight of powder, and the ball weighed, as before mentioned, eleven hundredweight. When the engineer brought the priming, the crowds who were about me retreated back as fast as they could; nay, it was with the utmost difficulty I persuaded the Pacha, who came on purpose, there was no danger: even the engineer who was to discharge it by my direction was considerably alarmed. I took my stand on some stone-work behind the cannon, gave the signal, and felt a shock like that of earthquake! At the distance of three hundred fathom the ball burst into three pieces; the fragments crossed the strait, rebounded on the opposite mountain, and left the surface of the water all in a foam through the whole breadth of the channel."

This, gentlemen, is, as near as I can recollect, Baron Tott's account of the largest cannon in the known world. Now, when I was there not long since, the anecdote of Tott's firing this tremendous piece was mentioned as a proof of that gentleman's extraordinary courage.

I was determined not to be outdone by a Frenchman, therefore took this very piece upon my shoulder, and, after balancing it properly, jumped into the sea with it, and swam to the opposite shore, from whence I unfortunately attempted to throw it back into its former place. I say unfortunately, for it slipped a little in my hand just as I was about to discharge it, and in consequence of that it fell into the middle of the channel, where it now lies, without a prospect of ever recovering it: and notwithstanding the high favour I was in with the Grand Signior, as before mentioned, this cruel Turk, as soon as he heard of the loss of his famous piece of ordnance, issued an order to cut off my head. I was immediately informed of it by one of the Sultanas, with whom I was become a great favourite, and she secreted me in her apartment while the officer charged with my execution was, with his assistants, in search of me.

That very night I made my escape on board a vessel bound to Venice, which was then weighing anchor to proceed on her voyage.

The last story, gentlemen, I am not fond of mentioning, as I miscarried in the attempt, and was very near losing my life into the bargain: however, as it contains no impeachment of my honour, I would not withhold it from you.

Now, gentlemen, you all know me, and can have no doubt of my veracity. I will entertain you with the origin of this same swaggering, bouncing Tott.

His reputed father was a native of Berne, in Switzerland; his profession was that of a surveyor of the streets, lanes, and alleys, vulgarly called a scavenger. His mother was a native of the mountains of Savoy, and had a most beautiful large wen on her neck, common to both sexes in that part of the world; she left her parents when young, and sought her fortune in the same city which gave his father birth; she maintained herself while single by acts of kindness to our sex, for she never was known to refuse them any favour they asked, provided they did but pay her some compliment beforehand. This lovely couple met by accident in the street, in consequence of their being both intoxicated, for by reeling to one centre they threw each other down; this created mutual abuse, in which they were complete adepts; they were both carried to the watch-house, and afterwards to the house of correction; they soon saw the folly of quarrelling, made it up, became fond of each other, and married; but madam returning to her old tricks, his father, who had high notions of honour, soon separated himself from her; she then joined a family who strolled about with a puppet-show. In time she arrived at Rome, where she kept an oyster-stand. You have all heard, no doubt of Pope Ganganelli, commonly called Clement XIV.: he was remarkably fond of oysters. One Good Friday, as he was passing through this famous city in state, to assist at high mass at St. Peter's Church, he saw this woman's oysters (which were remarkably fine and fresh); he could not proceed without tasting them. There were about five thousand people in his train; he ordered them all to stop, and sent word to the church he could not attend mass till next day; then alighting from his horse (for the Pope always rides on horseback upon these occasions) he went into her stall, and ate every oyster she had there, and afterwards retired into the cellar where she had a few more. This subterraneous apartment was her kitchen, parlour, and bed-chamber. He liked his situation so much that he discharged all his attendants, and to make short of the story, His Holiness passed the whole night there! Before they parted he gave her absolution, not only for every sin she had, but all she might hereafter commit.

Now, gentlemen, I have his mother's word for it (and her honour cannot be doubted), that Baron Tott is the fruit of that amour. When Tott was born, his mother applied to His Holiness, as the father of her child; he immediately placed him under the proper people, and as he grew up gave him a gentleman's education, had him taught the use of arms, procured him promotion in France, and a title, and when he died he left him a good estate.

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