TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER XXII

Preparations for the Baron's expedition into Africa–Description of his chariot; the beauties of its interior decorations; the animals that drew it, and the mechanism of the wheels.

Everything being concluded, and having received my instructions for the voyage, I was conducted by the illustrious Hilaro Frosticos, the Lady Fragrantia, and a prodigious crowd of nobility, and placed sitting upon the summit of the whale's bones at the palace; and having remained in this situation for three days and three nights, as a trial ordeal, and a specimen of my perseverance and resolution, the third hour after midnight they seated me in the chariot of Queen Mab. It was a prodigious dimension, large enough to contain more stowage than the tun of Heidelberg, and globular like a hazel-nut: in fact, it seemed to be really a hazel-nut grown to a most extravagant dimension, and that a great worm of proportionable enormity had bored a hole in the shell. Through this same entrance I was ushered. It was as large as a coach-door, and I took my seat in the centre, a kind of chair self-balanced without touching anything, like the fancied tomb of Mahomet. The whole interior surface of the nutshell appeared a luminous representation of all the stars of heaven, the fixed stars, the planets, and a comet. The stars were as large as those worn by our first nobility, and the comet, excessively brilliant, seemed as if you had assembled all the eyes of the beautiful girls in the kingdom, and combined them, like a peacock's plumage, into the form of a comet– that is, a globe, and a bearded tail to it, diminishing gradually to a point. This beautiful constellation seemed very sportive and delightful. It was much in the form of a tadpole! and, without ceasing, went, full of playful giddiness, up and down, all over the heaven on the concave surface of the nutshell. One time it would be at that part of the heavens under my feet, and in the next minute would be over my head. It was never at rest, but for ever going east, west, north, or south, and paid no more respect to the different worlds than if they were so many lanterns without reflectors. Some of them he would dash against and push out of their places; others he would burn up and consume to ashes: and others again he would split into fritters, and their fragments would instantly take a globular form, like spilled quicksilver, and become satellites to whatever other worlds they should happen to meet with in their career. In short, the whole seemed an epitome of the creation, past, present, and future; and all that passes among the stars during one thousand years was here generally performed in as many seconds.

I surveyed all the beauties of the chariot with wonder and delight. “Certainly,” cried I, “this is heaven in miniature!” In short, I took the reins in my hand. But before I proceed on my adventures, I shall mention the rest of my attendant furniture. The chariot was drawn by a team of nine bulls harnessed to it, three after three. In the first rank was a most tremendous bull named John Mowmowsky; the rest were called Jacks in general, but not dignified by any particular denomination. They were all shod for the journey, not indeed like horses, with iron, or as bullocks commonly are, to drag on a cart; but were shod with men's skulls. Each of their feet was, hoof and all, crammed into a man's head, cut off for the purpose, and fastened therein with a kind of cement or paste, so that the skull seemed to be a part of the foot and hoof of the animal. With these skull-shoes the creatures could perform astonishing journeys, and slide upon the water, or upon the ocean, with great velocity. The harnesses were fastened with golden buckles, and decked with studs in a superb style, and the creatures were ridden by nine postillions, crickets of a great size, as large as monkeys, who sat squat upon the heads of the bulls, and were continually chirping at a most infernal rate, loud in proportion to their bodies.

The wheels of the chariot consisted of upwards of ten thousand springs, formed so as to give the greater impetuosity to the vehicle, and were more complex than a dozen clocks like that of Strasburgh. The external of the chariot was adorned with banners, and a superb festoon of laurel that formerly shaded me on horseback. And now, having given you a very concise description of my machine for travelling into Africa, which you must allow to be far superior to the apparatus of Monsieur Vaillant, I shall proceed to relate the exploits of my voyage.

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