

TRAVELS OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

CHAPTER XXIV

The Baron secures his chariot, &c., at the Cape and takes his passage for England in a homeward-bound Indiaman—Wrecked upon an island of ice, near the coast of Guinea—Escapes from the wreck, and rears a variety of vegetables upon the island—Meets some vessels belonging to the negroes bringing white slaves from Europe, in retaliation, to work upon their plantations in a cold climate near the South Pole—Arrives in England, and lays an account of his expedition before the Privy Council—Great preparations for a new expedition—The Sphinx, Gog and Magog, and a great company attend him—The ideas of Hilario Frosticos respecting the interior parts of Africa.

I perceived with grief and consternation the miscarriage of all my apparatus; yet I was not absolutely dejected: a great mind is never known but in adversity. With permission of the Dutch governor the chariot was properly laid up in a great storehouse, erected at the water's edge, and the bulls received every refreshment possible after so terrible a voyage. Well, you may be sure they deserved it, and therefore every attendance was engaged for them, until I should return.

As it was not possible to do anything more I took my passage in a homeward-bound Indiaman, to return to London, and lay the matter before the Privy Council.

We met with nothing particular until we arrived upon the coast of Guinea, where, to our utter astonishment, we perceived a great hill, seemingly of glass, advancing against us in the open sea; the rays of the sun were reflected upon it with such splendour, that it was extremely difficult to gaze at the phenomenon. I immediately knew it to be an island of ice, and though in so very warm a latitude, determined to make all possible sail from such horrible danger. We did so, but all in vain, for about eleven o'clock at night, blowing a very hard gale, and exceedingly dark, we struck upon the island. Nothing could equal the distraction, the shrieks, and despair of the whole crew, until I, knowing there was not a moment to be lost, cheered up their spirits, and bade them not despond, but do as I should request them. In a few minutes the vessel was half full of water, and the enormous castle of ice that seemed to hem us in on every side, in some places falling in hideous fragments upon the deck, killed one half of the crew; upon which, getting upon the summit of the mast, I contrived to make it fast to a great promontory of the ice, and calling to the remainder of the crew to follow me, we all escaped from the wreck, and got upon the summit of the island.

The rising sun soon gave us a dreadful prospect of our situation, and the loss, or rather icefication, of the vessel; for being closed in on every side with castles of ice during the night, she was absolutely frozen over and buried in such a manner that we could behold her under our feet, even in the central solidity of the island. Having debated what was best to be done, we immediately cut down through the ice, and got up some of the cables of the vessel, and the boats, which, making fast to the island, we towed it with all our might, determined to bring home island and all, or perish in the attempt. On the summit of the island we placed what oakum and dregs of every kind of matter we could get from the vessel, which, in the space of a very few hours, on account of the liquefying of the ice, and the warmth of the sun, were transformed into a very fine manure; and as I had some seeds of exotic vegetables in my pocket, we shortly had a sufficiency of fruits and roots growing upon the island to supply the whole crew, especially the bread-fruit tree, a few plants of which had been in the vessel; and another tree, which bore plum-puddings so very hot, and with such exquisite proportion of sugar, fruit, &c., that we all acknowledged it was not possible to taste anything of the kind more delicious in England: in short, though the scurvy had made such dreadful progress among the crew before our

striking upon the ice, the supply of vegetables, and especially the bread-fruit and pudding-fruit, put an almost immediate stop to the distemper.

We had not proceeded thus many weeks, advancing with incredible fatigue by continual towing, when we fell in with a fleet of Negro- men, as they call them. These wretches, I must inform you, my dear friends, had found means to make prizes of those vessels from some Europeans upon the coast of Guinea, and tasting the sweets of luxury, had formed colonies in several new discovered islands near the South Pole, where they had a variety of plantations of such matters as would only grow in the coldest climates. As the black inhabitants of Guinea were unsuited to the climate and excessive cold of the country, they formed the diabolical project of getting Christian slaves to work for them. For this purpose they sent vessels every year to the coast of Scotland, the northern parts of Ireland, and Wales, and were even sometimes seen off the coast of Cornwall. And having purchased, or entrapped by fraud or violence, a great number of men, women, and children, they proceeded with their cargoes of human flesh to the other end of the world, and sold them to their planters, where they were flogged into obedience, and made to work like horses all the rest of their lives.

My blood ran cold at the idea, while every one on the island also expressed his horror that such an iniquitous traffic should be suffered to exist. But, except by open violence, it was found impossible to destroy the trade, on account of a barbarous prejudice, entertained of late by the negroes, that the white people have no souls! However, we were determined to attack them, and steering down our island upon them, soon overwhelmed them: we saved as many of the white people as possible, but pushed all the blacks into the water again. The poor creatures we saved from slavery were so overjoyed, that they wept aloud through gratitude, and we experienced every delightful sensation to think what happiness we should shower upon their parents, their brothers and sisters and children, by bringing them home safe, redeemed from slavery, to the bosom of their native country.

Having happily arrived in England, I immediately laid a statement of my voyage, &c., before the Privy Council, and entreated an immediate assistance to travel into Africa, and, if possible, refit my former machine, and take it along with the rest. Everything was instantly granted to my satisfaction, and I received orders to get myself ready for departure as soon as possible.

As the Emperor of China had sent a most curious animal as a present to Europe, which was kept in the Tower, and it being of an enormous stature, and capable of performing the voyage with *éclat*, she was ordered to attend me. She was called Sphinx, and was one of the most tremendous though magnificent figures I ever beheld. She was harnessed with superb trappings to a large flat-bottomed boat, in which was placed an edifice of wood, exactly resembling Westminster Hall. Two balloons were placed over it, tackled by a number of ropes to the boat, to keep up a proper equilibrium, and prevent it from overturning, or filling, from the prodigious weight of the fabric.

The interior of the edifice was decorated with seats, in the form of an amphitheatre, and crammed as full as it could hold with ladies and lords, as a council and retinue for your humble servant. Nearly in the centre was a seat elegantly decorated for myself, and on either side of me were placed the famous Gog and Magog in all their pomp.

The Lord Viscount Gosamer being our postillion, we floated gallantly down the river, the noble Sphinx gambolling like the huge leviathan, and towing after her the boat and balloons.

Thus we advanced, sailing gently, into the open sea; being calm weather, we could scarcely feel the motion of the vehicle, and passed our time in grand debate upon the glorious intention of our voyage, and the discoveries that would result.

"I am of opinion," said my noble friend, Hilario Frosticos, "that Africa was originally inhabited for the

greater part, or, I may say, subjugated by lions which, next to man, seem to be the most dreaded of all mortal tyrants. The country in general—at least, what we have been hitherto able to discover, seems rather inimical to human life; the intolerable dryness of the place, the burning sands that overwhelm whole armies and cities in general ruin, and the hideous life many roving hordes are compelled to lead, incline me to think, that if ever we form any great settlements therein, it will become the grave of our countrymen. Yet it is nearer to us than the East Indies, and I cannot but imagine, that in many places every production of China, and of the East and West Indies, would flourish, if properly attended to. And as the country is so prodigiously extensive and unknown, what a source of discovery must not it contain! In fact, we know less about the interior of Africa than we do of the moon; for in this latter we measure the very prominences, and observe the varieties and inequalities of the surface through our glasses—

“Forests and mountains on her spotted orb.

“But we see nothing in the interior of Africa, but what some compilers of maps or geographers are fanciful enough to imagine. What a happy event, therefore, should we not expect from a voyage of discovery and colonisation undertaken in so magnificent a style as the present! what a pride—what an acquisition to philosophy!”

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