

Classics To Go

**THE SURPRISING
ADVENTURES OF
BARON MUNCHAUSEN**



Rudolf Erich Raspe

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INTRODUCTION

It is a curious fact that of that class of literature to which Munchausen belongs, that namely of *Voyages Imaginaires*, the three great types should have all been created in England. Utopia, Robinson Crusoe, and Gulliver, illustrating respectively the philosophical, the edifying, and the satirical type of fictitious travel, were all written in England, and at the end of the eighteenth century a fourth type, the fantastically mendacious, was evolved in this country. Of this type Munchausen was the modern original, and remains the classical example. The adaptability of such a species of composition to local and topical uses might well be considered prejudicial to its chances of obtaining a permanent place in literature. Yet Munchausen has undoubtedly achieved such a place. The Baron's notoriety is universal, his character proverbial, and his name as familiar as that of Mr. Lemuel Gulliver, or Robinson Crusoe, mariner, of York. Condemned by the learned, like some other masterpieces, as worthless, Munchausen's travels have obtained such a world-wide fame, that the story of their origin possesses a general and historic interest apart from whatever of obscurity or of curiosity it may have to recommend it.

The work first appeared in London in the course of the year 1785. No copy of the first edition appears to be accessible; it seems, however, to have been issued some time in the autumn, and in the *Critical Review* for December 1785 there is the following notice: "Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia. Small 8vo, 1s. (Smith). This is a satirical production calculated to throw ridicule on the bold assertions of some

parliamentary declaimers. If rant may be best foiled at its own weapons, the author's design is not ill-founded; for the marvellous has never been carried to a more whimsical and ludicrous extent." The reviewer had probably read the work through from one paper cover to the other. It was in fact too short to bore the most blasé of his kind, consisting of but forty-nine small octavo pages. The second edition, which is in the British Museum, bears the following title; "Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia; humbly dedicated and recommended to country gentlemen, and if they please to be repeated as their own after a hunt, at horse races, in watering places, and other such polite assemblies; round the bottle and fireside. Smith. Printed at Oxford. 1786." The fact that this little pamphlet again consists of but forty-nine small octavo pages, combined with the similarity of title (as far as that of the first edition is given in the *Critical Review*), publisher, and price, affords a strong presumption that it was identical with the first edition. This edition contains only chapters ii., iii., iv., v., and vi. (pp. 10-44) of the present reprint. These chapters are the best in the book and their substantial if peculiar merit can hardly be denied, but the pamphlet appears to have met with little success, and early in 1786 Smith seems to have sold the property to another bookseller, Kearsley. Kearsley had it enlarged, but not, we are expressly informed, in the preface to the seventh edition, by the hand of the original author (who happened to be in Cornwall at the time). He also had it illustrated and brought it out in the same year in book form at the enhanced price of two shillings, under the title: "Gulliver Reviv'd: The Singular Travels, Campaigns, Voyages and Sporting Adventures of Baron Munnikhouson commonly pronounced Munchausen; as he relates them over a bottle when surrounded by his friends. A new edition considerably enlarged with views from the Baron's drawings. London. 1786." A well-informed *Critical Reviewer* would have

amended the title thus: "Lucian reviv'd: or Gulliver Beat with his own Bow."

Four editions now succeeded each other with rapidity and without modification. A German translation appeared in 1786 with the imprint London: it was, however, in reality printed by Dieterich at Göttingen. It was a free rendering of the fifth edition, the preface being a clumsy combination of that prefixed to the original edition with that which Kearsley had added to the third.

The fifth edition (which is, with the exception of trifling differences on the title-page, identical with the third, fourth, and sixth) is also that which has been followed in the present reprint down to the conclusion of chapter twenty, where it ends with the words "the great quadrangle." The supplement treating of Munchausen's extraordinary flight on the back of an eagle over France to Gibraltar, South and North America, the Polar Regions, and back to England is derived from the seventh edition of 1793, which has a new sub-title:—"Gulliver reviv'd, or the Vice of Lying properly exposed." The preface to this enlarged edition also informs the reader that the last four editions had met with extraordinary success, and that the supplementary chapters, all, that is, with the exception of chapters ii., iii., iv., v., and vi., which are ascribed to Baron Munchausen himself, were the production of another pen, written, however, in the Baron's manner. To the same ingenious person the public was indebted for the engravings with which the book was embellished. The seventh was the last edition by which the classic text of Munchausen was seriously modified. Even before this important consummation had been arrived at, a sequel, which was within a fraction as long as the original work (it occupies pp. 163-299 of this volume), had appeared under the title, "A Sequel to the Adventures of Baron Munchausen. . . . Humbly dedicated to Mr. Bruce the Abyssinian traveller, as the Baron

conceives that it may be some service to him, previous to his making another journey into Abyssinia. But if this advice does not delight Mr. Bruce, the Baron is willing to fight him on any terms he pleases." This work was issued separately. London, 1792, 8vo.

Such is the history of the book during the first eight or constructive years of its existence, beyond which it is necessary to trace it, until at least we have touched upon the long-vexed question of its authorship.

Munchausen's travels have in fact been ascribed to as many different hands as those of Odysseus. But (as in most other respects) it differs from the more ancient fabulous narrative in that its authorship has been the subject of but little controversy. Many people have entertained erroneous notions as to its authorship, which they have circulated with complete assurance; but they have not felt it incumbent upon them to support their own views or to combat those of other people. It has, moreover, been frequently stated with equal confidence and inaccuracy that the authorship has never been settled. An early and persistent version of the genesis of the travels was that they took their origin from the rivalry in fabulous tales of three accomplished students at Göttingen University, Bürger, Kästner, and Lichtenberg; another ran that Gottfried August Bürger, the German poet and author of "Lenore," had at a later stage of his career met Baron Munchausen in Pyrmont and taken down the stories from his own lips. Percy in his anecdotes attributes the Travels to a certain Mr. M. (Munchausen also began with an M.) who was imprisoned at Paris during the Reign of Terror. Southey in his "Omniana" conjectured, from the coincidences between two of the tales and two in a Portuguese periodical published in 1730, that the English fictions must have been derived from the Portuguese. William West the bookseller and numerous followers have stated that Munchausen owed its first origin to Bruce's

Travels, and was written for the purpose of burlesquing that unfairly treated work. Pierer boldly stated that it was a successful anonymous satire upon the English government of the day, while Meusel with equal temerity affirmed in his "Lexikon" that the book was a translation of the "well-known Munchausen lies" executed from a (non-existent) German original by Rudolph Erich Raspe. A writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1856 calls the book the joint production of Bürger and Raspe.

Of all the conjectures, of which these are but a selection, the most accurate from a German point of view is that the book was the work of Bürger, who was the first to dress the Travels in a German garb, and was for a long time almost universally credited with the sole proprietorship. Bürger himself appears neither to have claimed nor disclaimed the distinction. There is, however, no doubt whatever that the book first appeared in English in 1785, and that Bürger's German version did not see the light until 1786. The first German edition (though in reality printed at Göttingen) bore the imprint London, and was stated to be derived from an English source; but this was, reasonably enough, held to be merely a measure of precaution in case the actual Baron Munchausen (who was a well-known personage in Göttingen) should be stupid enough to feel aggrieved at being made the butt of a gross caricature. In this way the discrepancy of dates mentioned above might easily have been obscured, and Bürger might still have been credited with a work which has proved a better protection against oblivion than "Lenore," had it not been for the officious sensitiveness of his self-appointed biographer, Karl von Reinhard. Reinhard, in an answer to an attack made upon his hero for bringing out Munchausen as a pot-boiler in German and English simultaneously, definitely stated in the *Berlin Gesellschafter* of November 1824, that the real author of the original work was that disreputable genius,

Rudolph Erich Raspe, and that the German work was merely a free translation made by Bürger from the fifth edition of the English work. Bürger, he stated, was well aware of, but was too high-minded to disclose the real authorship.

Taking Reinhard's solemn asseveration in conjunction with the ascertained facts of Raspe's career, his undoubted acquaintance with the Baron Munchausen of real life and the first appearance of the work in 1785, when Raspe was certainly in England, there seems to be little difficulty in accepting his authorship as a positive fact. There is no difficulty whatever, in crediting Raspe with a sufficient mastery of English idiom to have written the book without assistance, for as early as January 1780 (since which date Raspe had resided uninterruptedly in this country) Walpole wrote to his friend Mason that "Raspe writes English much above ill and speaks it as readily as French," and shortly afterwards he remarked that he wrote English "surprisingly well." In the next year, 1781, Raspe's absolute command of the two languages encouraged him to publish two moderately good prose-translations, one of Lessing's "Nathan the Wise," and the other of Zachariae's Mock-heroic, "Tabby in Elysium." The erratic character of the punctuation may be said, with perfect impartiality, to be the only distinguishing feature of the style of the original edition of "Munchausen."

Curious as is this long history of literary misappropriation, the chequered career of the rightful author, Rudolph Erich Raspe, offers a chapter in biography which has quite as many points of singularity.

Born in Hanover in 1737, Raspe studied at the Universities of Göttingen and Leipsic. He is stated also to have rendered some assistance to a young nobleman in sowing his wild oats, a sequel to his university course which may possibly help to explain his subsequent aberrations. The connection cannot have lasted long, as in 1762, having already

obtained reputation as a student of natural history and antiquities, he obtained a post as one of the clerks in the University Library at Hanover.

No later than the following year contributions written in elegant Latin are to be found attached to his name in the Leipsic *Nova Acta Eruditorum*. In 1764 he alluded gracefully to the connection between Hanover and England in a piece upon the birthday of Queen Charlotte, and having been promoted secretary of the University Library at Göttingen, the young savant commenced a translation of Leibniz's philosophical works which was issued in Latin and French after the original MSS. in the Royal Library at Hanover, with a preface by Raspe's old college friend Kästner (Göttingen, 1765). At once a courtier, an antiquary, and a philosopher, Raspe next sought to display his vocation for polite letters, by publishing an ambitious allegorical poem of the age of chivalry, entitled "Hermin and Gunilde," which was not only exceedingly well reviewed, but received the honour of a parody entitled "Harlequin and Columbine." He also wrote translations of several of the poems of Ossian, and a disquisition upon their genuineness; and then with better inspiration he wrote a considerable treatise on "Percy's Reliques of Ancient Poetry," with metrical translations, being thus the first to call the attention of Germany to these admirable poems, which were afterwards so successfully ransacked by Bürger, Herder, and other early German romanticists.

In 1767 Raspe was again advanced by being appointed Professor at the Collegium Carolinum in Cassel, and keeper of the landgrave of Hesse's rich and curious collection of antique gems and medals. He was shortly afterwards appointed Librarian in the same city, and in 1771 he married. He continued writing on natural history, mineralogy, and archæology, and in 1769 a paper in the 59th volume of the Philosophical Transactions, on the bones

and teeth of elephants and other animals found in North America and various boreal regions of the world, procured his election as an honorary member of the Royal Society of London. His conclusion in this paper that large elephants or mammoths must have previously existed in boreal regions has, of course, been abundantly justified by later investigations. When it is added that Raspe during this part of his life also wrote papers on lithography and upon musical instruments, and translated Algarotti's Treatise on "Architecture, Painting, and Opera Music," enough will have been said to make manifest his very remarkable and somewhat prolix versatility. In 1773 he made a tour in Westphalia in quest of MSS., and on his return, by way of completing his education, he turned journalist, and commenced a periodical called the *Cassel Spectator*, with Mauvillon as his co-editor. In 1775 he was travelling in Italy on a commission to collect articles of vertu for the landgrave, and it was apparently soon after his return that he began appropriating to his own use valuable coins abstracted from the cabinets entrusted to his care. He had no difficulty in finding a market for the antiques which he wished to dispose of, and which, it has been charitably suggested, he had every intention of replacing whenever opportunity should serve. His consequent procedure was, it is true, scarcely that of a hardened criminal. Having obtained the permission of the landgrave to visit Berlin, he sent the keys of his cabinet back to the authorities at Cassel—and disappeared. His thefts, to the amount of two thousand rixdollars, were promptly discovered, and advertisements were issued for the arrest of the Councillor Raspe, described without suspicion of flattery as a long-faced man, with small eyes, crooked nose, red hair under a stumpy periwig, and a jerky gait. The necessities that prompted him to commit a felony are possibly indicated by the addition that he usually appeared in a scarlet dress embroidered with gold, but sometimes in black, blue, or

grey clothes. He was seized when he had got no farther than Klausthal, in the Hartz mountains, but he lost no time in escaping from the clutches of the police, and made his way to England. He never again set foot on the continent.

He was already an excellent English scholar, so that when he reached London it was not unnatural that he should look to authorship for support. Without loss of time, he published in London in 1776 a volume on some German Volcanoes and their productions; in 1777 he translated the then highly esteemed mineralogical travels of Ferber in Italy and Hungary. In 1780 we have an interesting account of him from Horace Walpole, who wrote to his friend, the Rev. William Mason: "There is a Dutch sçavant come over who is author of several pieces so learned that I do not even know their titles: but he has made a discovery in my way which you may be sure I believe, for it proves what I expected and hinted in my 'Anecdotes of Painting,' that the use of oil colours was known long before Van Eyck." Raspe, he went on to say, had discovered a MS. of Theophilus, a German monk in the fourth century, who gave receipts for preparing the colours, and had thereby convicted Vasari of error. "Raspe is poor, and I shall try and get subscriptions to enable him to print his work, which is sensible, clear, and unpretending." Three months later it was, "Poor Raspe is arrested by his *tailor*. I have sent him a little money, and he hopes to recover his liberty, but I question whether he will be able to struggle on here." His "Essay on the Origin of Oil Painting" was actually published through Walpole's good service in April 1781. He seems to have had plans of going to America and of excavating antiquities in Egypt, where he might have done good service, but the bad name that he had earned dogged him to London. The Royal Society struck him off its rolls, and in revenge he is said to have threatened to publish a travesty of their transactions. He was doubtless often hard put to it for a living, but the

variety of his attainments served him in good stead. He possessed or gained some reputation as a mining expert, and making his way down into Cornwall, he seems for some years subsequent to 1782 to have been assay-master and storekeeper of some mines at Dolcoath. While still at Dolcoath, it is very probable that he put together the little pamphlet which appeared in London at the close of 1785, with the title "Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia," and having given his *jeu d'esprit* to the world, and possibly earned a few guineas by it, it is not likely that he gave much further thought to the matter. In the course of 1785 or 1786, he entered upon a task of much greater magnitude and immediate importance, namely, a descriptive catalogue of the Collection of Pastes and Impressions from Ancient and Modern Gems, formed by James Tassie, the eminent connoisseur. Tassie engaged Raspe in 1785 to take charge of his cabinets, and to commence describing their contents: he can hardly have been ignorant of his employé's delinquencies in the past, but he probably estimated that mere casts of gems would not offer sufficient temptation to a man of Raspe's eclectic tastes to make the experiment a dangerous one. Early in 1786, Raspe produced a brief but well-executed conspectus of the arrangement and classification of the collection, and this was followed in 1791 by "A Descriptive Catalogue," in which over fifteen thousand casts of ancient and modern engraved gems, cameos, and intaglios from the most renowned cabinets in Europe were enumerated and described in French and English. The two quarto volumes are a monument of patient and highly skilled industry, and they still fetch high prices. The elaborate introduction prefixed to the work was dated from Edinburgh, April 16, 1790.

This laborious task completed, Raspe lost no time in applying himself with renewed energy to mineralogical

work. It was announced in the *Scots Magazine* for October 1791 that he had discovered in the extreme north of Scotland, where he had been invited to search for minerals, copper, lead, iron, manganese, and other valuable products of a similar character. From Sutherland he brought specimens of the finest clay, and reported a fine vein of heavy spar and "every symptom of coal." But in Caithness lay the loadstone which had brought Raspe to Scotland. This was no other than Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, a benevolent gentleman of an ingenious and inquiring disposition, who was anxious to exploit the supposed mineral wealth of his barren Scottish possessions. With him Raspe took up his abode for a considerable time at his spray-beaten castle on the Pentland Firth, and there is a tradition, among members of the family, of Sir John's unfailing appreciation of the wide intelligence and facetious humour of Raspe's conversation. Sinclair had some years previously discovered a small vein of yellow mundick on the moor of Skinnet, four miles from Thurso. The Cornish miners he consulted told him that the mundick was itself of no value, but a good sign of the proximity of other valuable minerals. Mundick, said they, was a good horseman, and always rode on a good load. He now employed Raspe to examine the ground, not designing to mine it himself, but to let it out to other capitalists in return for a royalty, should the investigation justify his hopes. The necessary funds were put at Raspe's disposal, and masses of bright, heavy material were brought to Thurso Castle as a foretaste of what was coming. But when the time came for the fruition of this golden promise, Raspe disappeared, and subsequent inquiries revealed the deplorable fact that these opulent ores had been carefully imported by the mining expert from Cornwall, and planted in the places where they were found. Sir Walter Scott must have had the incident (though not Raspe) in his mind when he created the Dousterswivel of his "Antiquary." As for Raspe, he betook himself to a remote part of the United

Kingdom, and had commenced some mining operations in country Donegal, when he was carried off by scarlet fever at Muckross in 1794. Such in brief outline was the career of Rudolph Erich Raspe, scholar, swindler, and undoubted creator of Baron Munchausen.

The merit of Munchausen, as the adult reader will readily perceive, does not reside in its literary style, for Raspe is no exception to the rule that a man never has a style worthy of the name in a language that he did not prattle in. But it is equally obvious that the real and original Munchausen, as Raspe conceived and doubtless intended at one time to develop him, was a delightful personage whom it would be the height of absurdity to designate a mere liar. Unfortunately the task was taken out of his hand and a good character spoiled, like many another, by mere sequel-mongers. Raspe was an impudent scoundrel, and fortunately so; his impudence relieves us of any difficulty in resolving the question,—to whom (if any one) did he owe the original conception of the character whose fame is now so universal.

When Raspe was resident in Göttingen he obtained, in all probability through Gerlach Adolph von Munchausen, the great patron of arts and letters and of Göttingen University, an introduction to Hieronymus Karl Friedrich von Munchausen, at whose hospitable mansion at Bodenwerder he became an occasional visitor. Hieronymus, who was born at Bodenwerder on May 11, 1720, was a cadet of what was known as the black line of the house of Rinteln Bodenwerder, and in his youth served as a page in the service of Prince Anton Ulrich of Brunswick. When quite a stripling he obtained a cornetcy in the "Brunswick Regiment" in the Russian service, and on November 27, 1740, he was created a lieutenant by letters patent of the Empress Anna, and served two arduous campaigns against the Turks during the following years. In 1750 he was

promoted to be a captain of cuirassiers by the Empress Elizabeth, and about 1760 he retired from the Russian service to live upon his patrimonial estate at Bodenwerder in the congenial society of his wife and his paragon among huntsmen, Rösemeyer, for whose particular benefit he maintained a fine pack of hounds. He kept open house, and loved to divert his guests with stories, not in the braggart vein of Dugald Dalgetty, but so embellished with palpably extravagant lies as to crack with a humour that was all their own. The manner has been appropriated by Artemus Ward and Mark Twain, but it was invented by Munchausen. Now the stories mainly relate to sporting adventures, and it has been asserted by one contemporary of the baron that Munchausen contracted the habit of drawing such a long-bow as a measure of self-defence against his invaluable but loquacious henchman, the worthy Rösemeyer. But it is more probable, as is hinted in the first preface, that Munchausen, being a shrewd man, found the practice a sovereign specific against bores and all other kinds of serious or irrelevant people, while it naturally endeared him to the friends of whom he had no small number.

He told his stories with imperturbable *sang froid*, in a dry manner, and with perfect naturalness and simplicity. He spoke as a man of the world, without circumlocution; his adventures were numerous and perhaps singular, but only such as might have been expected to happen to a man of so much experience. A smile never traversed his face as he related the least credible of his tales, which the less intimate of his acquaintance began in time to think he meant to be taken seriously. In short, so strangely entertaining were both manner and matter of his narratives, that "Munchausen's Stories" became a by-word among a host of appreciative acquaintance. Among these was Raspe, who years afterwards, when he was starving in London, bethought himself of the incomparable baron. He half

remembered some of his sporting stories, and supplemented these by gleanings from his own commonplace book. The result is a curious medley, which testifies clearly to learning and wit, and also to the turning over of musty old books of *facetiae* written in execrable Latin.

The story of the Baron's horse being cut in two by the descending portcullis of a besieged town, and the horseman's innocence of the fact until, upon reaching a fountain in the midst of the city, the insatiate thirst of the animal betrayed his deficiency in hind quarters, was probably derived by Raspe from the *Facetiae Bebelianæ* of Heinrich Bebel, first published at Strassburgh in 1508.

There it is given as follows: "De Insigni Mendacio. Faber clavicularius quem superius fabrum mendaciorum dixi, narravit se tempore belli, credens suos se subsecuturos equitando ad cujusdam oppidi portas penetrasse: et cum ad portas venisset cataractam turre demissam, equum suum post ephippium discidis, dimidiatumque reliquisse, atque se media parte equi ad forum usque oppidi equitasse, et caedem non modicam peregissee. Sed cum retrocedere vellet multitudine hostium obrutus, tum demum equum cecidisse seque captum fuisse."

The drinking at the fountain was probably an embellishment of Raspe's own. Many of Bebel's jests were repeated in J. P. Lange's *Delicioe Academice* (Heilbronn, 1665), a section of which was expressly devoted to "Mendacia Ridicula"; but the yarn itself is probably much older than either. Similarly, the quaint legend of the thawing of the horn was told by Castiglione in his *Cortegiano*, first published in 1528. This is how Castiglione tells it: A merchant of Lucca had travelled to Poland in order to buy furs; but as there was at that time a war with Muscovy, from which country the furs were procured, the Lucchese merchant was directed to the confines of the two countries.

On reaching the Borysthenes, which divided Poland and Muscovy, he found that the Muscovite traders remained on their own side of the river from distrust, on account of the state of hostilities. The Muscovites, desirous of being heard across the river announced the prices of their furs in a loud voice; but the cold was so intense that their words were frozen in the air before they could reach the opposite side. Hereupon the Poles lighted a fire in the middle of the river, which was frozen into a solid mass; and in the course of an hour the words which had been frozen up were melted, and fell gently upon the further bank, although the Muscovite traders had already gone away. The prices demanded were, however, so high that the Lucchese merchant returned without making any purchase. A similar idea is utilised by Rabelais in *Pantagruel*, and by Steele in one of his *Tatlers*. The story of the cherry tree growing out of the stag's head, again, is given in Lange's book, and the fact that all three tales are of great antiquity is proved by the appearance of counterparts to them in Lady Guest's edition of the *Mabinogion*. A great number of *nugoe canoroë* of a perfectly similar type are narrated in the sixteenth century "Travels of the Finkenritter" attributed to Lorenz von Lauterbach.

To humorous waifs of this description, without fixed origin or birthplace, did Raspe give a classical setting amongst embroidered versions of the baron's sporting jokes. The unscrupulous manner in which he affixed Munchausen's own name to the completed *jeu d'esprit* is, ethically speaking, the least pardonable of his crimes; for when Raspe's little book was first transformed and enlarged, and then translated into German, the genial old baron found himself the victim of an unmerciful caricature, and without a rag of concealment. It is consequently not surprising to hear that he became soured and reticent before his death at Bodenwerder in 1797.