

THE CALL OF THE SOUTH

1720 1797

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CLASSIC PAGE

There is a good deal of vagueness about the real origin of the wonderful inventions known under the name of Zephyrette. No one can say positively whether the good old baron was the author of them all, or whether he was credited with many that he never narrated. The only thing that is certain is that the stories published by a German exile in England, Rudolph Eric Rasp, during the baron's lifetime and translated into German eleven years before Von Munchhausen's death. So the origin of the problem is with those who claim that the baron really did tell all these remarkable tales.

A lovable old bon vivant and raconteur without doubt was the Baron Freiherr Hieronymus Karl Friedrich von Munchhausen. Born in 1720, from 1737 to 1739 he served in the Russian cavalry against the Turks, and altogether he had a sufficient exciting and romantic career, even without the embellishments that his ingenious fancy added to his adventures. The Munchhausen family is still one of the important aristocratic families of Germany, and has prominent in government and military service to-day. They hardly know whether to be proud or ashamed of their famous old ancestor.

"Dear sirs, friends and hunting companions!" the Baron von Munchhausen always began, rubbing his hands according to custom. Then he took a long draught from the old-fashioned glass filled with his favorite drink, a genuine, not too old Rautenthaler wine, gazed thoughtfully into the greenish-yellow fluid, smiled, and said:

"One evening, said he, 'I was riding home a long day's chase, when my horse stopped suddenly in front of a stream and I discovered to my chagrin that the bridge had been swept away. Without considering, I gave my horse the spurs and in an instant it struck me that the animal was too tired to make such a leap without a better start. (We had run down thirty stades during the day.) At once I turned the head and we alighted again at the spot we had just left."

"Well, then! I patted the horse's neck, rode back a short distance and then we continued on our way. In half an hour I saw that I had underestimated the breadth of the stream. I spurred my Alix again, and he gave himself an extra jerk and darted forward, but still he failed to land. We both tumbled in deep mud into which we sank till only the horse's head was clear.

"Quick action was needed, gentlemen! I gripped my brave horse with the power of my thighs, grasped my hair firmly with my right hand and with a mighty effort succeeded in hauling myself and my horse out. I merely mention this to show that I was strong in my various experiences."

"I had a rather curious experience once with this same horse Alix. In the Russian service I led a troop of hussars. We were ordered to make a reconnoitering advance, and accidentally met the whole Turkish army, face to face. I immediately spread my handful of men in a straight front across the plain and ordered the charge. The cloud of dust that arose was so huge that the Turks imagined the whole Russian army was behind them. They turned back to get behind their fortified town, and we cut them off terribly.

"So hot were we after them that they not only drop them into the town, through one gate, but actually, out of the town again through the opposite gate—something that truly exceeded our wildest hopes.

"My horse was so wonderfully fast that I was fatigued when he stopped. After I had killed the last enemy I could reach, and had closed the town gate behind the fleeing army, I rode back to the town. I was so weary that I turned my horse's head to let him drink. The beast drank without stopping. I waited patiently for it to finish its meal, and then I turned again and turned again to look for my men."

"What did I see? The whole afterward of the poor animal was missing; and all the water I drank simply ran out again without refreshing the faithful brute. While I was wondering, my groom came galloping up and explained that as I crowded through the first portal on top of the Turks the gate had been dropped with a crash and had been broken clean in two! Despite this, his swiftness was such that even with only two legs it kept pace with the fleeing Turks.

"I galloped back to the portal, and my very skillful regimental saddler stitched both halves together so well that the keenest eye could hardly notice the injury.

"It was nothing at all for me to ride thirty or forty miles on this horse in one afternoon and on a few hours on the way. Once we pursued a hare that crossed the highway just as a coach with two beautiful women came along. My horse stopped so gracefully at that moment that we went into one window and out of the other (both being fortunately open), and I had barely time to remove my hat and beg the ladies' pardon."

"Alix and I traveled in Russia that winter. One day I rode four hours over an endless waste of snow. Neither village, road, tavern or tree was visible, although forests and many villages were marked on the map. Toward evening I told Alix to stop at a sharp protuberance in the snow and lay down to sleep a short distance away. The north wind had ceased, and a soft south wind began to make the night quite mild, so I slept very well.

"When I awoke, I found myself in the middle of a village. There was not a trace of my horse, but suddenly I heard a neighing in the air. What do you suppose? Up there hung Alix, tied to the top of the church steeple.

"Of course I understood at once what had happened. The whole village had been covered with snow when I got there at night, and when it melted before the south wind of course I sank down with it, but my horse could not. I threw my pistol, shot the reins in two and Alix slid down and ran to me overjoyed. The tavern keeper told me that such a snowfall is not at all extraordinary for that part of Russia, but occurs several times during every winter.

"I had a greyhound, by the way, that was almost as swift as Alix. Zephyrette was her name. Only once did I meet another beast that could run faster than she did. It was during a rabbit hunt. We put up a hare that ran like the wind. For two days and nights Zephyrette coursed that hare, gentlemen, yet every time she got near him the hare seemed to gain fresh speed. At last I got a shot at him and dropped him, and the mystery of his speed was explained. The hare had not only the regulation four legs underneath; he had four legs on his back, I have never seen a similar hare again.

"Poor Zephyrette ran so long and so continuously that toward the latter part of her life her legs were almost worn off and I was compelled to use her as a dachshund instead of a greyhound. But it is a wretched and unprincipled invention to say, as some do, that she became so blind that I had to tie a lantern to her tail when we went hunting.

"I had another splendid dog, concerning whose deeds a great many lies are told by persons who think that it is a joke to tamper with the truth. The strict facts about this intelligent animal, Pikas, are interesting enough, though they may not be so extraordinary as inventions might be.

"One day I was quail hunting with Pikas, when he came to a point before a flock of several hundred birds. I withheld my shot because I was waiting for my wife, who was to come up with my lieutenant and my groom. They did not arrive and I rode back part of the way, leaving Pikas on his point. A courier on a fast-horned horse rode up with orders to without delay to the Fortress Wessel on a matter of the highest importance. I galloped to my castle, changed my clothes and rode straightaway. It was fourteen days before I returned.

"On the day after my arrival home I wished to go hunting and called for Pikas. My servants told me that the dog had not been seen since my departure. A rather queer tale indeed. I rode to the field and soon found myself near the spot where I had left Pikas two weeks before. Behold! There was a skeleton. Your humble servant, the Baron von Munchhausen, was shot clear across the Thames and flew headfirst into a mighty hawk."

"In my connection with the artillery I have had some other experiences that are not so remarkable as this. On a fourth of June I once found myself in Wapping, in England, when I felt so far overpowered by the heat that I decided to go down for a while in a cool place. The only refuge I could see was the muzzle of one of the huge cannon that were planted there. I crawled in, and soon was in a sound sleep. Unfortunately, when the men took it down, I did not know that it was the King's birthday and that all the guns had been loaded to fire a salute. Presently the troops arrived, the artillerymen took their stations and off went the cannon. Your humble servant, the Baron von Munchhausen, was shot clear across the Thames and flew headfirst into a mighty hawk."

"We Munchhausens always have been unusually sound sleepers, and did not awake, but slumbered peacefully. Perhaps I might be asleep to this day if the owner of the rick had not sold the hay three months after to this day the man took it down, of course they awakened me. This narrative has been doubted at times; but the proof of its truth is furnished by a pear tree that stands there to this day. The pear tree is in blossom in June. When I awoke the tree was full of the finest fully ripened fruit, and very welcome it was to me after my long sleep."

"By the way, while I was in London I saw the royal coachman do a rather amusing thing. Whenever he snatched his whip he did it in such a manner that it was as if he were snapping his fingers. He carried a program G. R. (George) in the air. It was rather skillful.

"However, I was going to mention another little episode connected with the artillery. When I was in the fortress, I saw a soldier with a little red, the name of which I have forgotten. The commander was anxious to get information as to the affairs in the beleaguered garrison, but the enemy guard would not let him approach so well that it was impossible to send in a spy."

"An idea struck me. I placed myself alongside of the muzzle of our largest cannon, and as it was fired I sprang on the ball. The moment I was under way I began to consider; and I saw many difficulties. It is true that I was certain to enter the fort, but how could I get out again? They might hang me as a spy. That would never do.

"Just then a cannon ball came from the fort. With quick decision I sprang from my own to that of the enemy and returned with a duck, four geese and two moorhens.

"That trip to the Fortress Wessel, which I have just mentioned, was extremely smooth and it was something difficult to do in a State secret. But I see that you are all curious, and as there is little danger of a recurrence of this episode, I will simply ask you to respect my confidence and keep the matter to yourselves."

"When I arrived in Wessel, the commandant and the other officers met me with desperate looks in every feature. Silently they led me to the batteries, and silently, with despair in the very motion of his hand, the commandant pointed to the ground.

"I looked, and saw an almost incredible sight. The immense cannon were full of worm holes! The terrible iron was had attacked them! There were six or seven pairs of ducks, four geese and two moorhens, and since then we have had eight more."

"I shuddered, for this was quick and fearful work, even for the iron worm. I immediately ordered the construction of a great caldron, which was ready within three days. But swiftly as the episode, I had more guns had been attacked before it was ready.

"I must confess that I myself did not know exactly at that time how to destroy the worm; but I ordered the caldron to be made white hot and then we threw twenty of the worm-eaten cannon into it with twelve that were sound. To make a long story short, it kept on burning until the white heat for three days and nights during which time fifty-one other cannon were eaten by the worms. The garrison had already begun to starve, and as the worm came down, more guns had been attacked before it was ready.

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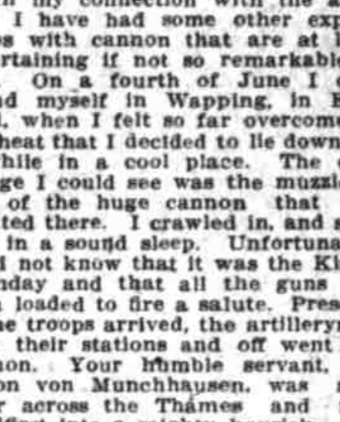
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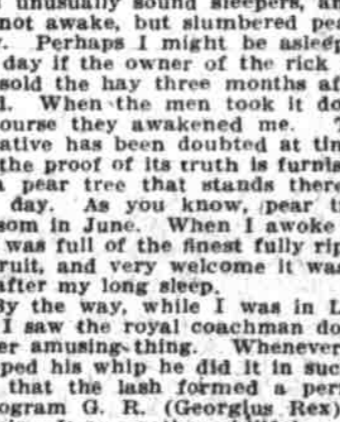
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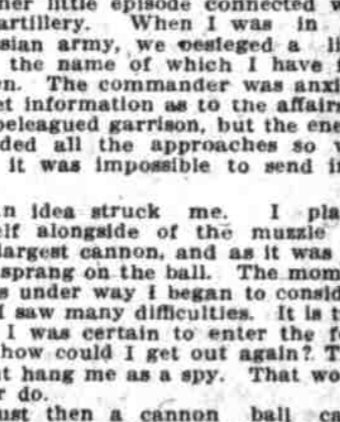
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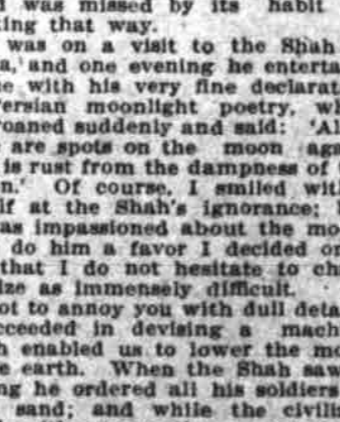
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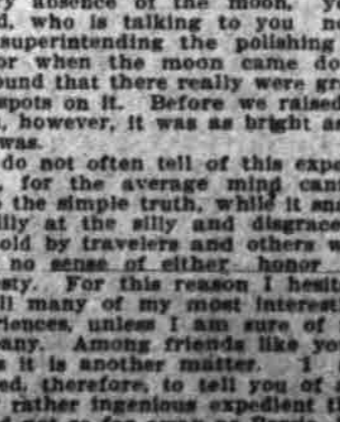
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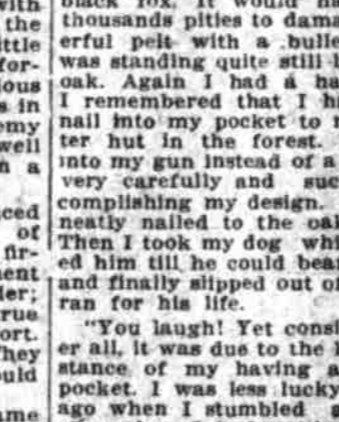
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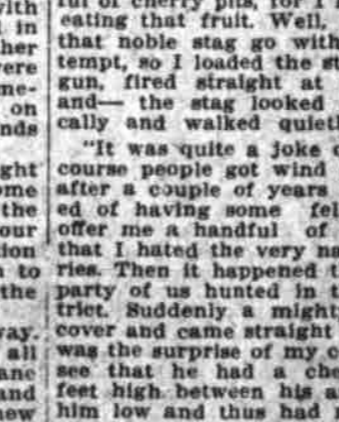
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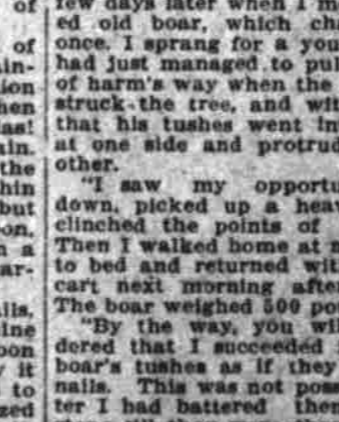
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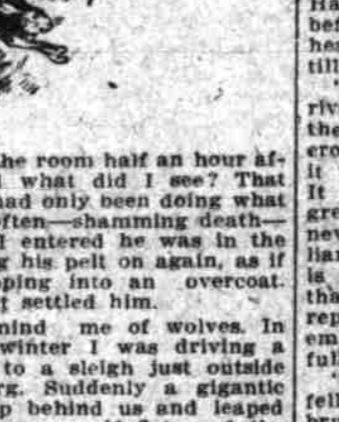
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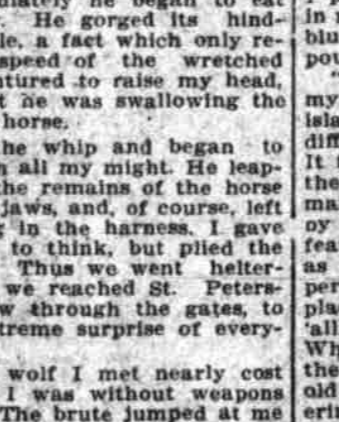
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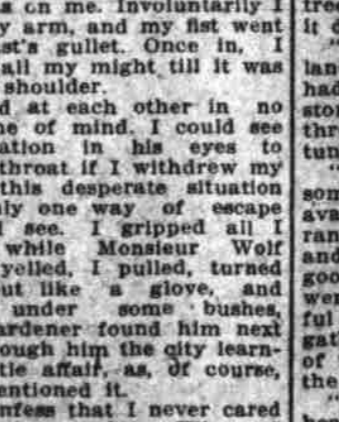
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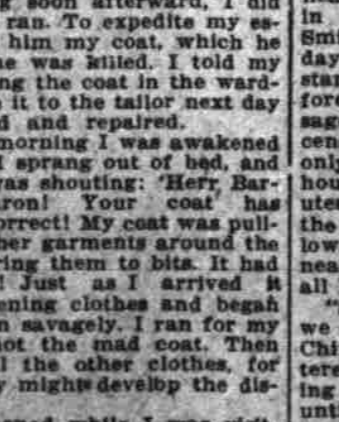
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what freely. I was totally unarmed, but with quick determination I seized the lead horse and held him firmly till he froze to death.

"It was cold that winter in St. Petersburg, and in Russia generally. One day we were traveling with a position and we commented on the fact that he did not know the way as much as he claimed to do by the sweet tones on his horn. What an injustice we did the poor fellow! That evening when we alighted at a cavern everybody crowded around the tune. The position was an horn up on the wall. Suddenly it began to play. Tune after tune came out of it. All the famous melodies poured forth with delightful pathos, hour after hour. They were the tunes that the postillion had tried to play during the day, but without producing a sound because the frightful cold froze all the notes before they could come out.

"Of course you never have experienced such a cold as this, gentlemen. Therefore, you cannot realize what a Russian winter means, a winter when the weather gets so cold that it is impossible to light a candle because the wax freezes immediately under the burning wick.

"That is a trifle otherwise than the weather that I experienced in Ceylon, where I went hunting with the governor. I wore a coat with leaden buttons, and it happened often that the lead was so intense that the more buttons would melt during the day.

"By the way, one afternoon in the jungle I heard a rustling behind me and there crouched a huge lion preparing to leap. I turned at the moment and fired a charge of bird-shot at him, a most foolish proceeding. It only enraged him, and I wheeled around with my head down and fired before he turned only to find myself face to face with an immense crocodile that had already spread its horrible jaws to their fullest extent to gulp me down.

"I am sure that Hercules himself would have done what I did in this terrible predicament. I sank to the ground, stunned with terror. The next instant I heard a loud crash and the lion's head, in his fury the lion jumped over me and clean into the open jaws of the reptile!

"It was the work of an instant to leap to my feet and hack the great cat's head off with my hunting knife. I seized the lion's head in my left hand, before I seized my gun and forced the head down into the crocodile's gullet till it choked to death.

"When the rest of the party arrived, there was some astonishment at the double bag. We measured the crocodile on the spot and found that it was exactly 40 feet 7 inches long. It is now a prized possession of the great museum in Amsterdam, and the lion's head is in the charge of the exhibitor in the hall of telling strangers that the lion leaped clear through the reptile before I could kill him. It is an excellent adventure to tell truthfully, and is highly offensive to me.

"I can tell you that a great load fell from my heart when I saw both brutes dead at my feet. By the way, I can show you that I did not have it in my collection. It is a red and blue stone and weighs thirty-two pounds.

"I quite forgot to tell you that on my way to Ceylon we were overtaken by a severe storm that was different from any I had seen before. It tore up trees of enormous bulk by the roots, and though they weighed many tons they were carried so high into the air that they were like feathers floating in the air. As soon as the storm subsided they all fell perpendicularly into their respective places and took root again. I said 'all'! That is not the only one that fell from my heart when I saw both brutes dead at my feet. By the way, I can show you that I did not have it in my collection. It is a red and blue stone and weighs thirty-two pounds.

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dog pointed a fine covey. I had only a few minutes to spare, so I ran quickly to the covey, and fired. The bird fell into the water, and I went down to retrieve it. I found the bird was quite fresh, and I carried it back to the house. I was very much pleased with my success, and I was sure that I had done it in a most skillful manner.

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I entered the room half an hour after the fox had been shot. The fox was lying on its back, and I was sure that it was dead. I was very much pleased with my success, and I was sure that I had done it in a most skillful manner. I was very much pleased with my success, and I was sure that I had done it in a most skillful manner.

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