

HANDOUT 4.3 A - BARON MÜNCHAUSEN STORIES

From *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Münchausen*

By Rudolph Erich Raspe

Meeting the Stag

ONE DAY as I was hunting and had spent all my shots, I unexpectedly met with a stately stag. It looked at me as unconcernedly as it he had known of my empty pouches. I charged at once with powder and a good handful of cherry-stones upon it, for I had sucked the fruit as far as the hurry would permit. This I let fly at him, and hit him just on the middle of the forehead, between his antlers. It stunned him - he staggered - yet he made off.

A year or two after, being with a party in the same forest, I beheld a noble stag with a fine full grown cherry-tree above ten feet high between his antlers. At once I recollected my former adventure, looked on him as my property, and brought him to the ground by one shot.

This gave me the haunch and cherry-sauce; for the tree was covered with the richest fruit, and I had never tasted anything like it before.

Bathing into Trouble

I WAS bathing in the pleasant sea near Marseilles one summer's afternoon, when I discovered a very large fish. It swam towards me at top speed with his jaws wide open. There was no time to lose, I couldn't possibly avoid him. At once I made myself as slim as possible by closing my feet and placing my hands near my sides. In that position I passed directly between his jaws and into his stomach. There I remained some time in total darkness. It was comfortably warm inside there.

At last I got an idea: Through pain he would be glad to get rid of me. I found out that tumbling, hop, step, and jump wasn't enough. But then I tried to dance a hornpipe. That disturbed the fish. Soon he tried to get me out by fits and starts. I kept dancing and invented a forerunner of Riverdance, and at last he roared horridly. He stood almost straight up in the water with head and shoulders exposed.

Through that the fish was discovered by the people on board an Italian trading vessel sailing by. The trader harpooned him in a few minutes. As soon as he was brought on board, I heard the crew talk about how they should cut him up so as to preserve as much oil as possible.

I had reasons to fear their weapons would cut up me too, not only the fish. And even though there seemed to be room enough for a dozen men in this creature's stomach, I stood as near the centre as possible to avoid getting cut and sundered.

But my fears were soon dispersed: The brave Italians began by opening the bottom of the belly. As soon as I noticed a glimmering of light, I called out lustily to be released from the now almost suffocating situation. It is impossible for me to do justice to the degree and kind of astonishment that my voice evoked from inside a fish. The people on the boat were even more astonished at seeing a naked man walk upright out of his body.

In short, gentlemen, I told them the whole story, as I have done you, while amazement struck them dumb.

After taking some refreshment and jumping into the sea to cleanse myself, I swam to my clothes. They lay where I had left them on the shore. As near as I can calculate, I was confined in the stomach of this animal for nearly four and a half hours.

The Horse at the Church Tower

AS I WAS into, I set out on my first travel to Russia in midwinter. For in spring and autumn the roads in Poland are so soaked by the rain that you get stuck, and in summer they are dry and so dusty that you can't stop coughing. Then you can't really make headway.

Therefore I travelled in winter on horseback. Regrettably, I froze more and more for each day, for I had put on just a light overcoat. The whole country was covered with snow. Often I couldn't see any road, path, tree or signpost. The winter darkness descended. Night and darkness. I could see no village ahead and didn't know the road. Very tired I stepped down from my good horse and tied it to something that looked like a pointed stump of a tree. It stood there above the snow. Then for the sake of safety, I placed my pistols under my arm and laid down on the snow and fell asleep. I slept so soundly that I did not open my eyes till full daylight. The sun was shining. I looked around and guess where I was? I lay in the middle of a small village on a churchyard! I couldn't find my good horse beside me. My horse was gone! Then all of a sudden I heard wild neighing from somewhere above me. I looked up and saw my animal hanging by his bridle at the weathercock of the church-tower. It was neighing and struggling and wanted to get down, which was quite understandable.

What had happened dawned on me. The village, including the church-tower, had been snow-bound. And what I had taken for the top of a tree, had been the cross or weathercock of the church. At night the weather had changed dramatically and thawed. So while I was sleeping, I had been sinking down with the melting snow, gently and soon enough, till I woke up among the tombstones.

Without long consideration, I took one of my pistols, shot the bridle in two, brought down the horse, and proceeded on my journey. My horse was overjoyed when it trod on solid ground again. I vaulted into the saddle and we carried on our adventurous journey together.

The Lion and Hungry Crocodile

IN OLD Sri Lanka my uncle and I were received with great signs of Oriental politeness. After we had lived there about a fortnight, I accompanied one of the governor's brothers on a shooting party. He was a strong, athletic man and was used to the lovely climate, for he had lived there some years. He could stand the sunshine far better than I could. While we strolled along, he went into a thick wood when I was only at the rim of it, near the bank of a large lake. I heard a rustling noise behind me at the time. On turning about I was almost scared to death at the sight of a lion that seemed hungry and drew nearer and nearer to me, without asking for my consent.

What should I do? I had not even a moment to reflect on that. My gun was only charged with swan-shot, and I had no other ammunition on me. Well, even though I couldn't hope to kill such an animal with the weak kind of ammunition I had, yet I had some hopes of frightening it by the bang. Maybe I could wound it a bit too.

I shot at once, without waiting till he was within reach. That just made the lion angry. Now it ran towards me at full speed. I tried to escape, but the moment I turned around to run, I found a large crocodile with its mouth extended almost ready to receive me. This was the situation, and on my right hand was the water's edge, on my left a deep precipice filled with poisonous creatures.

In short, while the lion was on its hind-legs, just in the act of seizing me, I dropped to the ground with fear. It made the lion miss the target and spring over me. As I lay there I expected to feel his teeth or talons in some part of me every moment, but after waiting like this for a few seconds, I heard a violent but unusual noise. It was different from any sound I had ever heard, and that was no small wonder: When I ventured to raise my head and look round, I saw the lion had jumped into the wide open mouth of the crocodile. It made me feel relief, if not jubilant joy at the moment.

Now the head of the one stuck in the throat of the other, and each of the animals fought to save itself. I remembered I had a large jungle knife by my side. I severed the lion's head with it at one blow, and the body fell at

my feet. Then, with the butt-end of my rifle I rammed the lion's head farther into the throat of the crocodile and choked it - he could neither gorge nor eject that head. In this way I won over two rather powerful enemies of man.

Now my companion came back for me. When he got aware I wasn't following him into the wood, he came back, fearing I had lost my way or met with some accident.

When we had congratulated each other, we measured the crocodile, which was just forty feet long. As soon as we had told the governor of the astonishing happening, he sent a wagon and servants. They brought home the two carcasses. The lion's skin was properly preserved with its hair on. Then it was made into tobacco-pouches. And when we later returned to Holland I gave them to the burgomasters, who in return bravely asked me to accept a thousand ducats. The skin of the crocodile was stuffed in the usual way and sent to the public museum at Amsterdam. There the exhibitor tells the whole story to each one who comes to look at it. Some of his variations of the tale are rather unlikely. One of them is that the lion jumped quite through the crocodile, and was making its escape at his back-door when I cut its head off, and three feet of the crocodile's tail along with it. But

that part of the story is purely invented.

Raspe, Rudolf Erich (1737-1794): *Baron von Münchhausens vidunderlige reiser til lands og til vanns*. Cappelen. Oslo, 1976. Retrieved 26