

LAWRENCE MILLMAN

## THE LAST JOURNEY OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

PERMIT ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF. I am Karl Friedrich Hieronymus Freiherr von Munchhausen—an adventurer whose exploits have spanned the globe and, indeed, reached far beyond that egregious ball of humanity.

The ordinary reader may be familiar with some of my exploits, such as the time I extricated myself from the muck of a swamp by yanking on my own hair or the time when I was swallowed by a whale. Unlike Jonah, I managed to liberate myself from the maw of this cetacean by forcing it to sneeze.

The most percipient of my readers may know of my failed attempt to persuade a mediocre young Austrian artist named Adolf Hitler to become an interior decorator, although I dare say they won't know about the experience I'm now going to describe.

So there I was, a passenger on the giant cruise ship called the Titanic. I'd been offered free passage on that vessel's maiden voyage on the assumption that my fame would bring both honour and fortune to the ship and its owners.

I found my fellow passengers rather dull, so I spent most of my time in my cabin writing up my friendship with Napoleon Bonaparte. Early in his career, I failed to convince "Nappie" (as I called him) that he should become a *cordon bleu* chef rather than a *cordon bleu* European conqueror. Years later, he wrote me a letter from St. Helena, the island where he'd been exiled, saying, "I should have listened to you, *mon cher* Baron."

With the Titanic in the final leg of its North Atlantic journey, I warned the captain to watch out for icebergs.

"My dear fellow," the captain laughed. "Don't you realize there isn't an iceberg in the world capable of doing battle with this monster of a ship?"

Being an unusually far-sighted individual, I saw a large iceberg in the

distance. I decided not to take any chances, so I quickly put together a dirigible made from light wood, wire, and canvas, then hopped aboard this makeshift contraption along with the most important part of my viaticum: a hand-whittled goose quill pen and my notebook.

As my dirigible rose up from the deck of the Titanic, I directed it westward toward the nearest landfall, the island of Newfoundland, but a perpetual elevator gale grabbed it and raised it up, up, up into the sky, past a circling armada of satellites, until the earth looked no bigger than a dwarf pea.

All of a sudden I saw a woolly-whiskered old gentleman seated peacefully on a cumulus cloud.

I don't often have the opportunity to engage in a *tête-à-tête* with a deity, much less a supreme one, so I tied my dirigible to one of the cloud's more robust tendrils with an end-to-end joint knot and, as I did so, I said, "Greetings, Creator, old chap."

Replied the Supreme Being: "Greetings yourself, Copernicus. Or is it Galileo Galilei? Please be advised that my memory has disappeared because I have Alzheimer's. Or is it Asperger's?"

"The name's Baron Munchhausen," I declared, tweaking my mustache. "Perhaps you know about the time I bested your son in a game of croquet?"

"I have a son?"

"You do, indeed. A son named Jesus."

"Jesus, eh? Then I must have had an affair with a Latino woman . . ."

Hardly had he uttered these words when an airborne velociraptor flew past the cloud.

"I created that critter 75 million years ago," my companion told me.

"Splendid work, old fellow, but perhaps you can tell me about some deed you've performed more recently?" I inquired, bringing out my quill pen and notebook.

God looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, "Some years ago, a Parisian (or was it a Parsi?) prayed to me to shield him from blasphemous desire (or was it the evil eye?), and I gave him a bad case of dysentery (or was it eczema?). Needless to say, he didn't give a fiddler's fornication for my gift."

I informed God that he now had a chance to revive his career. Pointing downward, I mentioned that a giant cruise ship that was in immediate

danger of being struck by an iceberg. Perhaps he could prevent that from happening?

God shook his head. “All I can do now is idly sit on this cloud and be senile,” he said, and then he sneezed dramatically. So dramatically that it made the cetacean’s sneeze that once propelled me out of its stomach seem like a polite sputter.

“God bless me,” the Supreme Being exclaimed, I thought, egotistically.

As a result of this sneeze, my dirigible was blown loose from the cloud to which it’d been anchored and went up into the sky again, lurching and twisting at a speed much faster than the speed of the elevator gale that had taken me to the deity’s cloud in the first place.

At last my dirigible lost its buoyancy and landed with a soft thud on the moon. Contrary to popular belief, our lunar neighbour was not a barren wasteland. Just the opposite, in fact. Everywhere I looked, I saw gentle streams, meadows punctuated by pink moonflowers, and forests of old growth moon trees.

Once I climbed out of my dirigible, a deep baritone voice said, “Ah, Baron Munchhausen. Welcome to the moon!”

The speaker of these words, a giant face imbedded firmly in the moon, identified himself as the Man in the Moon.

“My wife and I delight in reading about your adventures,” observed the Man, aiming one of his saucer eyes at me and the other at a large female face.

“I especially liked your story about the time you beat the Grim Reaper in a scythe-fighting duel,” the Woman in the Moon declared.

After tying my dirigible to the stump of a moontree, I noticed the moon’s two residents were preparing a feast in my honour.

“Do sit down, my good Baron and have a sip of this wine,” said the Man in the Moon, pointing to an elegant Chippendale dinner table. “It’s a Beaujolais from the vintage year 1874, brought to us by our good friend Jules Verne.”

I found the wine’s flavour heavenly. No less heavenly was the feast itself, which included *Confit de canard*, *Coq au vin*, *Croque monsieur*, *Coquilles Saint-Jacques*, *Bouillaisse*, *Quenelles*, and *Peche Melba*.

“Monsieur Verne was kind enough to bring us this cuisine,” the Man said. “By the way, did you ever meet the fellow?”

“Just once,” I replied. “Monsieur Verne asked me how many leagues



Gustave Doré, "A Voyage to the Moon," from Rudolf Erich Raspe, *Les Aventures du Baron de Munchausen* (1862)

under the sea I'd travelled. I told him, 'Only about 20,000,' I told him. 'I might have gone deeper but for the fact that I was engaged in hand-to-tentacle combat with a giant squid.'"

Later the Man offered me a comfortable little cabin and informed me that it would be a perfect place for me to write up my adventures.

Weightlessness had made it difficult if not impossible for me to write when I'd been in my dirigible, but after I settled in the cabin, my goose quill pen—as befits a device boasting the wing of an avian—literally flew across the page, and I began writing this very narrative.

One morning I heard an extremely loud roar, and a giant rocket ship with "The Apollo 11 Destroyer" written on its side landed almost cheek by jowl with my dirigible. The door of this rocket clicked open, and down a catwalk strutted a man wearing a three-piece spacesuit and tie, along with fancy aviator shades.

Upon seeing me, this well-dressed astronaut exclaimed, "Baron Munchhausen! I thought you went down with the Titanic."

"I managed to escape at the last moment, Mr. . . .?"

"Neil Armstrong's the name. Development's the game." Whereupon he proceeded to dance around in a maniacal fashion.

Upon seeing the perplexed look on my face, he explained, "I'm making all sorts of steps on behalf of mankind." Then he added, "I've come to the moon to turn it into a shopper's paradise . . ."

Shortly after he uttered these words, a veritable army of sow-bellied earthlings emerged from the spaceship.

"Okay, guys," Armstrong proclaimed to these individuals. "For starters, I want you to construct a megamall directly on top of the Man in the Moon and his wife . . ."

"You can't burden those folks in that way!" I interjected.

Armstrong ignored my comment. "Then clearcut that forest of moon trees just behind you, it's positively unsightly," he went on. "And you see that green space with a small cabin over there? It's a perfect location for an amusement park, so dispose of it . . ."

"But that's my writing studio!" I interjected again.

"Sorry, Baron, but you can't stand in the way of progress."

All at once there was the sound of dynamite, and a few seconds later I heard the death throttles of my two new friends, the Man and Woman in the Moon. A wave of sadness swept through my body. I figured I couldn't

remain on the moon any longer, lest that wave end up drowning me, so I ran to my cabin, fetched this manuscript, and climbed into my dirigible.

“You’re leaving us, Baron?” Armstrong said to me with a surprised look on his face. “Don’t you want to witness the moon’s first retail store?”

“I have urgent business elsewhere,” I informed him. I stopped short of telling him that this urgent business was my desire to travel far, far away from his vile machinations.

A blast of wind soon began blowing the dirigible down, down, down toward the earth. At one point I saw a comet straddled by a man wearing heat-protective trousers heading toward me. “Hi there, Baron,” the man shouted at me. “My name’s Halley, and I’m heading up to Venus so I can find myself a cute gal. Wanna join me?”

“Thanks for the offer, Mr. Halley, but I find it better to go down rather than up,” I shouted back.

My dirigible continued falling until it at last landed with a thump on the deck of the Titanic the very moment the ship hit the iceberg. Rather than join other passengers in a lifeboat, I retreated to my cabin and put the finishing touches on the narrative you’re now reading.

Editor’s note: Whether Baron Munchhausen went down with the Titanic or whether he survived isn’t known. This manuscript, presumably his final work, was found in a bottle on a shingle beach in Newfoundland several years after the Titanic sank.