

THE
STRANGE ADVENTURES
 OF
HANDEL ARCHIMEDES

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CHAPTER I

ALPINE PROLOGUE

"HABEN Sie einen Herr gesehen, einen dicken Herr?"

John, the linguist, began to translate to Felicia.

"Oh, you are English," interrupted the speaker. "Have you seen a gentleman pass this way—a fat gentleman in a light grey suit and a straw hat?"

The Ochsenalpweg between Tschierschen and Arosa is described in Baedeker's 'Switzerland' as a mountain pass. In reality it is a broad and gentle path which even the fattest gentleman could traverse in safety. But John and Felicia were positive that they had met no one during the last hour.

Their questioner conferred with his two companions. "Are you quite sure?" he asked anxiously.

"Dead certain," replied John.

"Then good afternoon, and forgive us for troubling you." But once more he gazed enquiringly at them as if expecting some 'stop-press' information.

"Time flies, old thing," remarked one of his friends. "We ought to toddle on if we're to find the dear chappie."

"Of course. We may see him in—what is the village at the other end?"

"Tschierstchen," said Felicia.

"You didn't see anyone answering to my description there, I suppose?"

"I'm sure we didn't," vowed John.

"But then we weren't looking out," added Felicia.

"You couldn't help noticing the dear lad if you saw him," said the second man, a fair-haired dandy with an affected drawl. "Old top, we can turn it down; he's perambulating some other woodland path."

"If you really think so," said the first, who was inclined to stoutness himself and looked tired, "we might retrace our steps. What do you say, Peters?"

"I'm sure I don't mind, sir," answered Peters.

"You are quite certain you didn't see him?" repeated the first man.

"Quite certain," John and Felicia echoed.

"Then once more good afternoon, and please excuse me for troubling you." The three men set off back to Arosa.

"We'd better have tea now," said Felicia.

Unfastening his rucksack, John extracted their little Primus stove and wandered off to fill the pot at a little stream burbling ten yards away.

"I hope the fat man hasn't fallen down a

precipice," remarked Felicia on his return.

"But there are none."

Alpine pastures sloped gently from the broad track to the valley below. No one in possession of full mental and physical faculties could come to grief on that easy path. Felicia surmised that he might be a local lunatic who had escaped from his keepers.

"Funny sort of keepers," commented John, cutting the bread. "I say, what's up with that contraption?"

Even the best-behaved Primus has its eccentric moments, and theirs was no exception. For a while it engrossed their attention.

"Scusa, Signor."

Looking up from his task, John saw a sturdy swarthy individual, with a bristly growth of unshaven stubble on his chin.

"Pardon?" queried John.

The other burst into an eloquent torrent of what John knew to be Italian, though he did not understand its meaning. John tried him in English, French and German, but the Italian shook his head. Finally, realising that he was unable to extract the information he required, he lifted his hat with a flourish, bowed deeply and strode on swiftly towards Arosa.

"Wonder if he's lost a fat man too," speculated John.

"Don't be an ass," said Felicia.

"Well, if he has, I can't help him."

It was a hot afternoon, and Arosa, their map told them, could not be more than three miles

distant. After a leisurely tea they drowsed.

"John, it's nearly six."

Rising lazily, he helped her to clean and pack away the stove. For a mile or so they tramped on in silence.

"I wonder if they found him," suddenly remarked Felicia.

"Just what I was thinking," answered John.

"You'll forgive me for troubling you, sir and madam."

They looked, first at each other, then at their interlocutor, a red-faced man, dressed in a loud check coat, with corduroy breeches, leather leggings and a stock instead of a collar.

"You've not seen a gentleman walking by himself in these parts?" he asked, a slight Irish accent tinging his voice.

"What was he like?"

"Faith, he'd be the stoutest fellow you ever set eyes on."

"How was he dressed?" asked John.

"I couldn't tell you what he'd be wearing to-day. Could you, my dear fellow?" He turned to his companion, a man of medium height, with a freckled face.

"A grey suit and a straw hat, I think." The speaker took great pains over the 'h' in hat.

"Well, I'm damned," ejaculated John, when they had resumed their journey.

"Yes, dear, and so am I. Damned with the insatiable curiosity of the elephant's child."

"Sounds like the opening chapter of a detective yarn," observed John.

"Let's play, John."

"Play at what?"

"At stories. I once saw a prize competition in a magazine. 'Not to-day, gasped Susan. Yes, to-day, and in four hours' time, was the grave reply.' Then you had to make up the rest in a thousand words. We'll make a story about the fat man whom everyone is looking for."

The tale they concocted kept them engrossed until a bend in the path revealed Arosa, with its numerous hotels, a couple of hundred feet below them.

"We shall be in plenty of time for dinner," observed John.

"I'm hungry," said Felicia. Then they continued their story until their nailed mountain boots clattered uncomfortably on Arosa's pavements.

"So, you see," concluded Felicia, "the fat man is really the detective all the time. And where are we going to sleep to-night?"

"Well, what about this place? Isn't it good enough for you?" He pointed with his alpenstock to the imposing portal of the Hotel Eden.

"Yes, dear, but are we good enough for it? It's hardly the resting place for a couple of trampers, carrying all their luggage on their backs. And can we afford it?" she added, catching sight of the resplendent uniform of the Eden's hall porter.

"Damn the expense, for once in a way. And in mountain country they'll be used to all sorts

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of coves stalking into the Hotel du Swank in any old get-up."

Nevertheless it was with somewhat mixed feelings that they enquired whether there was a vacant room. A managerial personage, correctly tailored in irreproachable cutaway, emerged from his office and said that he could accommodate them. Somewhere modestly on the fourth floor, they imagined, and looked at each other with feelings akin to dismay when he ushered them into a magnificent apartment on the first, equipped with a luxurious bathroom.

"What is the price?" asked Felicia, with a slight quaver in her voice.

"Ten francs a night, madam."

Had he quoted fifty francs, they would have assumed that he was endeavouring to reduce his terms to the minimum. Again they looked at each other, hardly daring to breathe.

"I could show you another, if you don't like it," added the manager.

"Oh, no, it will do very nicely. Ten francs, you said?"

"Yes, madam, ten francs a night. Dinner at half-past seven. And now, if you'll excuse me—" he hurried from the room.

Alone, they gasped out their surprise. "Better take the gifts the gods offer," suggested John.

"My dear, did you notice the man? He hardly knew what he was saying."

"Lovely hot water," she called out from the bathroom a few minutes later. "Who packed the sponges? Do look, that's a dear. We must

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make ourselves presentable, to live up to this room."

But both felt like fishes out of water when they descended to the dining-room. And as most of the guests were already seated, they had to run the gauntlet of many disconcerting eyes. But shyness had not driven away their hunger, and they remarked that the soup was a long time in coming. When it eventually arrived, it was cold and greasy.

There followed another long interval before a flustered waiter brought them a dish of tough, stringy meat.

"The vegetables?" asked Felicia, catching his eye five minutes later.

"Directly, madam." He scuttled timidly away, but no vegetables were forthcoming.

"Not quite up to the room, Felix," commented John, when, tired of waiting, they started on the meat. "I wish they'd hurry up with our drinks; someone's spilt a salt-mine in the frying pan."

As if in answer to his request, a waiter dumped a bottle of wine on their table. They had ordered mineral water, but he rushed away before they could point out the error; after vainly trying to attract his attention, they decided to drink it.

"Something funny going on here," observed John.

"Something unusual is going to happen. I feel it in my bones."

It happened at that very moment, for it is most unusual for a waiter to let a tray fall in

the dining-room of a first-class hotel. Its contents splashed themselves over two entering guests.

"John," cried Felicia excitedly.

"Bang has gone considerably more than saxepee."

"Look at the man who got most of it. The waiter is trying to clean him up."

"I say, it's the first fellow who asked us for the fat man. And the other is the chap they called Peters, who only spoke when he was spoken to."

The waiter brought some fish, which, by the laws of dining, should have preceded the meat. Again he rushed off before they could protest.

"Suppose," said Felicia, looking askance at the untouched dish before her, "suppose all this commotion is because nobody can find the fat man."

John laughed. "I wish they'd catch him and give us another dinner to celebrate it. Hallo, do you see that chap sitting at the table where the earnest searchers now are? I seem to know his face." He pointed out a tall man with grizzled hair and a military bearing. Beside him sat a lady, whose hair was obviously peroxide and whose lips and cheeks were beautified as much by Art as by Nature. Felicia stared at the man.

"John, he's Wentworth Waldegrave. The famous sculptor who makes busts of all the nobles."

"That fellow's not a sculptor; he looks more

like a colonel than any colonel should. What ho, a colonel on the bust, which is the only sort of bust he knows, for the lady obviously isn't Mrs. Colonel."

Felicia giggled. "But the man is Wentworth Waldegrave. Don't you remember Mrs. Handforth's at home where he was the lion of the evening? He always comes out strong at these affairs—good advertisement for him. If possible he makes a speech, telling you how he detests the stage Bohemian with a shaggy mane and velvet jacket. And I believe he really did a bit of soldiering during the war."

"Felix, I've got him. A.P.M. at Rouen, the tinniest of all the tin gods I struck. Someone said he was a sculptor in private life. Rowton Jones hatched some priceless scheme for pulling the blighter's leg, which didn't come off because we were shoved up the line at a moment's notice. That's the chap, and evidently he's up to the neck in this fat man stunt, judging by the way he's laying down the law to the other fellows."

"I'm afraid I shall have to revise my story," sighed Felicia.

"Oh, why, Felix? Don't be cruel."

"We made the men who asked us the villains who were plotting to throw the fat man over a precipice when they found him. But as those two are Mr. Waldegrave's friends, they can't be villains. He would never lend himself to dirty work at the cross roads. So bad for his reputation."

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"Then why not make the fat man the persecuted victim whom the gallant artist is trying to save. Here's your villain, Felix." Both stared as the unshaven Italian emerged from an obscure corner of the room and strode fiercely into the lounge.

"Beware of the Black Hand," mocked John. "Years ago the fat man unwittingly incurred the wrath of the dreaded secret society. To-day he has paid the price of his folly. Oh, thank the Lord."

A waiter had snatched away the unpalatable fish, placing in its stead cheese, rolls and butter before them. For a while they satisfied the cravings of hunger in grim silence.

"You know," remarked John, when the last crumb had disappeared, "the explanation is quite simple."

"What explanation?" asked Felicia absent-mindedly, gazing at the empty platter.

"That fat man is a popular character here. Probably a witty fellow who keeps them all amused. They think he's gone out on some dangerous climb by himself. That accounts for the hotel staff being worried. So bad for business if a visitor has an accident. And, by the way, Felix, I've still got a whole lot of biscuits in my rucksack."

They rose and moved to the door, not noticing at first that the sculptor's party were also leaving.

"Look here, Atherley, for the hundredth time you've put this affair into my hands and you

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must take your orders from me, eh what? Damme! I'm not going to have you upset my plan of campaign." Waldegrave's voice rang out behind them.

"John, could the biscuits wait for a few minutes?"

"I shouldn't die of hunger for another quarter of an hour or so. What's up, Felix?"

"Let's go in the lounge, then."

They found a quiet table where they could survey the whole room. Hungry guests hurried through it and out into the street, seeking restaurants where they could supplement their meagre meal. But near the entrance door sat the Italian, who lit ferociously and consumed rapidly one cigarette after another. Waldegrave paced up and down impatiently. Every now and then scraps of his conversation with his apologetic friend Atherley floated to their ears.

"Felix, we've no business to listen."

"How can we help it, dear? Mr. Waldegrave's voice is so loud."

"Damme, Atherley, for the thousandth time I tell you the man's an impostor," he vociferated in close proximity to their table.

"That upsets your mountain accident theory," remarked Felicia. "That fat man is the villain, after all. And John, I really should like some coffee if you could catch that waiter's eye."

"Do more good to grab his arm." He got up and started off in pursuit of the waiter. There was a grin on his face when he rejoined his wife.

"Look, Felix, there's old Whiskey and Horses, the Irishman and his cockney pal," he whispered as they sauntered into the room.

The couple eventually seated themselves at a table close to the Italian. Felicia noticed that all three were intently watching the door.

"And so are those two fellows, though they're pretending not to. Good Lord, aren't they priceless, Felix?"

He drew her attention to a tall bald-headed man with enormous moustaches that stuck out like wire from his chubby cheeks. His brown, doggy, pathetic eyes were bent on his companion, a short squat fellow with closely cropped hair, a hooked nose and a ruddy but wrinkled face.

"A most ferocious brigand," commented John. "Cut any throat you like for sixpence."

"I don't agree. He really looks quite mild if it wasn't for those moustaches."

"Then a reformed bandit who has turned Sunday school teacher," compromised John. "And how do you fit him into the story, Felix?"

Felicia looked puzzled and confessed herself beaten.

"But I don't never understand," protested the bald man in loud plaintive tones to his neighbour.

"Oh, you woolly whiskered wop," was the curt reply they heard him receive.

"That settles your dilemma, Felix. Whiskers is as baffled by the mystery as you are. But his Yankee comrade, who is, I fear, of a somewhat impatient nature, has a cut and dried theory.

You might make his acquaintance and compare notes, unless we can find some other interested spectator who will lighten our darkness."

Under cover of an illustrated paper they took stock of the room's other occupants. The peroxide lady was there, rather bored, and by her side sat Peters, endeavouring to make polite conversation. There was another lady in the room, a buxom elderly dame with a florid complexion, faded yellow hair and a vacant expression. She also had secured a table near the door, but more, they concluded, from love of fresh air than for any purpose connected with the fat man, for she displayed no interest in anything but her knitting.

Next they discovered an old clergyman, clad in the correct black of the Church of England. "Rather an old dear," Felicia voted him, but, like the lady with the knitting, he seemed ignorant of anything unusual. Finally John caught sight of the man with the affected drawl who had been with Atherley in the afternoon. He sat alone and actually appeared to have enjoyed his dinner, for there was a contented look on his face as he lolled back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling, to which he puffed the most perfect smoke rings from his cigarette.

"Time's up," said John at length.

"What?"

"I said 'time's up,' Felix. Fifteen minutes gone, and no further developments. Do you want to be a widow to-morrow, or shall we keep our appointment with the biscuits?"

"I'm ready." She rose from her seat, but sat down again quickly. From the dining-room came sounds of a violent altercation.

"Jamais de la vie," screamed a shrill voice. An excited lady, with hair of the same artificial tint as the one who sat with Peters, rushed into the room, followed by a dark-skinned grey-bearded man.

"But I don't never understand," said the Sunday school brigand, skipping hastily out of her way.

Her follower and the brigand's companion endeavoured to pacify her, arguing volubly in rapid, incomprehensible French. But something which the bearded man said roused her wrath to boiling point. She raised her ivory fan and slashed savagely at him.

John wondered whether he ought to interfere, but as he started to rise, Felicia's hand restrained him. "Not our quarrel, dear," she whispered.

But the famous sculptor evidently thought it his quarrel and, as often happens in such cases, he drew the storm of wrath on himself. Swinging her fan, the enraged lady brought it down full on the stiff, white expanse of his dress shirt. The resulting dint was terrible to behold.

Wentworth Waldegrave stared at her in speechless amazement. A tense silence, like the hush before thunder, fell upon the room. Then, just as he seemed about to take some step to avenge his honour, the tones of a rich bass voice floated in through the open door.

"Come, landlord, fill the flowing bowl, until
it's flowing over,
For to-night we'll merry be, for to-night
we'll merry be,
And to-morrow we'll be sober,"

it chanted.

All stood still, listening intently. The swelling sound indicated that the unseen singer was approaching.

Then he entered.

He did not walk or run; his slow, bounding motion could only be described as a gambol. He had brown, curly hair, rosy, puffy cheeks and a jaunty little moustache. Large as his head was, it appeared small on his enormous body, which was encased in a light grey suit.

He was the fattest man Felicia had ever seen!