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A SWIM EXTRAORDINARY

I have been all my life a sort of amphibious animal, having, like many an old Roman, learned to swim long before I had learned to read. The bounding backs of the billows were my only rocking-horse when I was a child, and dearly I loved to ride them when a fresh breeze was blowing. I rarely tired in the water, where I often amused myself for hours together. I grew up with such a liking for the exercise, that I have never been able to forego the opportunity for a swim when it offered; and a daily bath has been for a long course of years as necessary to me as my daily food. The exercise of swimming has been through life my chief pleasure and my only medicine—a never-failing restorative from weakness and weariness, and, what may appear strange to some readers, from the effects of irritation, anxiety, and mortification as well.

This accomplishment, however, once led me into a strange

adventure. I was engaged in a rather extensive commercial tour through the central kingdoms of Europe. I had crossed the Hungarian frontier about the middle of the day, after being much annoyed and chafed by a multiplicity of delays and extortions; and at length, hot and wearied, arrived at B— late in the evening. As soon as I caught sight of the Danube in the distance, I resolved that the first thing I would do after getting housed and refreshed by a few hours' sleep, should be to enjoy the luxury of a leisurely swim in that noble river. With this view, passing through the town, I put up at a small but decent *gasthof* which stood upon a patch of rising ground close upon the margin of the stream; and having first seen to the comfort of my horse, which was well-nigh knocked up with the day's journey, and next attended to my own, I retired to rest at an early hour, without descending to the common room and joining in the beery orgies of the evening. I rose next morning, as was my custom, a full half hour before the sun; and finding no one stirring in the house, proceeded to the stables, the back of which overlooked the water. Here I found a middle-aged tatterdemalion, whose flesh and costume were all of one colour, and that the precise hue of the dungheap from which he had just arisen, and from which one might have imagined him to have been engendered. He was in the act of cleaning out the stable, as well as the task could be accomplished, with his bare feet and a shovel, the blade of which was not much bigger than his hand. With some trouble, and with the aid of a small coin, I contrived to make him understand my purpose; and he led me up

stairs to a loft, in which I might undress and deposit my clothes, and pointed to a rude flight of wooden steps, leading from the window to the water's edge, and from which I might plunge in from any height I chose.

In a few minutes, I had left my clothes upon a truss of odorous clover, and plunging in head-foremost from the top of the ladder, I rose to the surface at a few yards' distance from the bank, and struck out vigorously to enjoy my swim. The sensation was deliciously cool and pleasant. Keeping my eyes fixed upon the opposite shore, I made towards it, feeling all the while as light as a cork and as strong as a colt. How long I revelled in the first exquisite sense of enjoyment I have not, nor had I then, any very distinct idea. Turning, however, upon my back, just to vary my position, my head, of course, faced the shore I had left, from which, to my great surprise, the good town I had left had vanished entirely, and I became aware that the rapid current of the river, upon which, in my eagerness for a bath, I had not bestowed a single thought, had already carried me some mile or two in its progress towards the Black Sea. Not being victualled for so long a voyage, I began to look around me, and to curse the headlong haste which had brought me into such a dilemma. I found that I was as nearly as possible in the centre of the stream, and immediately put all my vigour in requisition to regain the shore I had left. This, to my no small dismay, I soon discovered was not to be accomplished, the current setting strong towards the opposite side. I made an experiment of my strength by means of a

small chip of wood which floated by: I could judge what prospect I had of regaining the northern bank of the river by the distance at which I could leave the chip behind me, while swimming in a contrary direction; but it was of no use: in a quarter of an hour's hard struggling I had not gained twenty yards, while I had floated more than a mile further down the stream. Nothing remained for it but to make for the shore, towards which I was drifting at any rate, and that must be done as fast as possible; for being now really alarmed, I felt, or fancied that I felt my strength deserting me. Under this impression, I struck out more furiously, and thus fatigued myself the more; and it was with no small difficulty I at last reached the opposite bank, up which I climbed, with sensations almost as forlorn and hopeless as those of the shipwrecked mariner whom the tempest casts ashore.

In fact, I would have given a round sum for the rags of the shipwrecked mariner to cover me. Here I was in the condition of a primeval savage, on a desert spot, without a dwelling in sight, and prevented, by the want of clothing, from seeking out the habitations of men. I ran to the highest ground in the neighbourhood, and that was close to the water's edge, and looked around me in every direction. On the shore which I had left, I could see what appeared the dim outline of buildings at a great distance; but on the side of the river on which I was standing, nothing but a vast tract of low land was visible, which, from its swampy condition, it was plain was overflowed by the river in times of flood. I hallooed for some minutes with all the

strength of my lungs; but the only response was the rising of a few moorfowl from the marsh, which wheeled cackling above my head, as though wondering what my business might be, and then settled down again in the reedy pool from whence they had arisen at my cry. I sat down upon a stone, and feeling that I was fast going into a state of distraction, tried to collect my faculties, and to consider what was best to be done, or, indeed, if anything could be done. With the sense of my desperate condition came also a horrible sense of the ludicrous. What would my principals in London think of their continental agent shivering, without a rag on, upon the desolate banks of the Danube? Here was I, a man well known upon 'Change, with four thousand pounds in the three-and-a-half per cents, the idea of which had been a comfort to me for many a long year, ready to forfeit the whole sum in exchange for the raggedest pair of pantaloons that ever dangled from a scarecrow, and ready, too, to go down upon my bare knees to any ministering angel of an old Jew who would propose the bargain. I grinned a despairing laugh at the thought of such an absurd compact, and then groaned aloud as the conviction overcame me, that in my present circumstances it would be a prudent one.

Relapsing into grim and savage silence, I glared gloomily at a sharp jagged stone which lay at my feet, and at length, taking it in my hand, walked mechanically into a stagnant pool, where a group of willow sprigs were growing on a few old stumps barely emerging from the water. I contrived to sever a dozen or two of

the twigs by hacking at them with the flint—and, carrying them to dry ground, was soon busy in rehearsing over again the toilet of Adam in Paradise. Tying their ends together, I crossed a couple of them over my shoulders in the manner of a shooting-belt, and from these I managed to suspend a kind of frock of green leaves, which effectually transformed my appearance from that of the rude savage of the wild to the civilised Jack-in-the-Green of May-day in London. I may declare without reserve, that I never felt more proud or pleased with any exploit of my whole life than I now did at the completion of my toilet. My spirits, which had before been villainously depressed, rose all at once, and I no longer despaired of restoration to society. I walked majestically up and down, keeping a careful look-out both upon the water and the land. A boat passed at the distance of half a mile from the shore, but I tried in vain to attract the notice of the crew. My voice could not be heard so far, and if by accident they saw me, they must have mistaken me for a bush. I now turned my back to the river in disgust, and commenced a severe and careful scrutiny upon the land-side, to see if I could possibly in any direction make out any signs of life. Five or six hours must have elapsed since the moment when I plunged headlong from the ladder; the sun was now nearly at his meridian; the blue mist which had covered everything, and veiled the distance from my view in the morning when I emerged from the water and crawled up the muddy bank, had now entirely rolled away, and the vast level tract of marsh-land was open to my inspection to a distance at

least of some five or six English miles, at the extremity of which it was bounded by a rising ground sparsely wooded. I imagined that I could distinguish the mud-walls of a row of small cottages, partly concealed by a group of trees, though I was by no means sure that it was not a bank of earth or the face of a rock. I looked anxiously round for other indications of life; and after a close and protracted scrutiny, had the satisfaction of distinctly perceiving a thin column of white smoke winding up the dark background of the distant hill. I resolved now, in case no means of escape should turn up on the river, to attempt the passage of the marsh in another hour at latest—though, from former experience, I well knew the difficulty of the attempt, and the little probability there was that a perfect stranger would succeed in getting across. I saw, too, that if I would make the attempt at all, I must not defer it much longer, since to be overtaken by darkness in the midst of the bog would be certain destruction.

I passed another half-hour in surveying the river, in which, about four miles below the point on which I stood, I now for the first time discovered several small islands, overgrown with reeds or underwood; but they manifested no signs of any human inhabitants, so far as I could distinguish, and I adhered to my resolution of crossing the marsh. Delaying no longer, I descended from my post of observation, intending to travel in a straight line to the point where I could still see the smoke ascending. I had not, however, proceeded 100 yards, before I found that my idea of journeying in a straight line was utterly impracticable. I

could walk over the firm soil, and I could swim the pools; but through the deep masses of soft bog I could neither walk nor swim; and after a narrow escape from smothering in one of them, I came to a stand-still. I found, too, that now I was down in the swamp, I could not see the distant hill which was the object of my journey, though it was plain, that from any part of the marsh I might see the little mound on the river's brink which I had just left. I returned to the mound, and, by the aid of a number of loose stones which were lying about, contrived to erect a couple of small fagots of willow-branches, at a distance of about ten feet from each other, to serve as direction-posts, arranging them so that while I could see but one of them, I might know that I was in the right track. Thus I was left at liberty to take a sinuous course in search of firm ground, as, by making an observation by my telegraph, I could at any time regain the right path.

It is my decided opinion, that had I been left alone, and suffered to continue my journey, I should have accomplished the undertaking, arduous as it was. I had already walked and waded, and swum and staggered, and floundered along for more than a mile, when I suddenly caught sight of a ragged, bare-headed figure about half a mile in advance of me, who was stooping over a stagnant pool, and groping in the water for something, perhaps leeches, of which he was in search. Without reflecting for a moment what might be the effect of my sudden apparition upon the mind of an ignorant boor alone in such a solitude, and too much overjoyed to think of anything but the overwhelming

delight of securing a 'guide, philosopher, and friend,' I hastened towards him with all the speed of which I was capable—now clearing a route among reeds and rushes, and now sinking up to my neck in a pool. In less than half an hour, I had arrived, panting for breath, to within a few yards of the pond over the margin of which he was still bending, with his eyes fixed in the water. Pausing for one moment to recover my wind, I raised myself to my full height, and hailed him at the top of my voice with a 'Hola! Mein Herr,' which, like an electric shock, brought him to his feet in an instant. I saw in a moment that I had committed a fatal blunder. The poor wretch stood aghast, horrified beyond the power of description; his white hair stood on end; his bloodshot eyes were bursting from their sockets; his mouth yawned like a cavern, and emitted a faint, gurgling sound, and every limb shook with the agony of fear. I saw that it was necessary to reassure him; and seeing no other way of approaching him than by swimming the pond, I entered the water, and, staff in hand, made towards him. Before I had lessened the distance between us one-half, he had so far recovered himself as to be able to give utterance to one wild yell of terror, and to take madly to his heels. When I had swum the pool, and ascended to the spot which he had left, I saw him running at the top of his speed, and following a winding route, with which he was evidently familiar, as he avoided the water and the bogs, and kept on firm ground. I made an attempt to come up with him; but in my haste trod upon a piece of loose shale, which, sliding beneath me, threw me upon the ground, and

badly wounded my right foot, so that for the moment I could proceed no further.

As I sat upon the ground, endeavouring to stanch the fast-flowing blood from my instep by winding round it some long flags from the marsh, I watched the poor fellow till he was no longer in sight, and marked that he never relaxed his pace till he disappeared under the cluster of trees above which I had first noticed the white smoke ascending. To cross the marsh without a guide, was now out of the question; and choosing a dry and mossy spot, I lay down and rested till the afternoon was far advanced, having made up my mind, if no succour came from the hamlet, which I now felt assured was not far from the edge of the marsh, that I would return to the river before it was dark, and make a last and vigorous attempt to swim to the group of islands which I had observed in the distance, in one or other of which I might hope to find human inhabitants. I kept my telegraph in sight, and, the sun being now low in the horizon, was thinking of retracing my steps towards it, when, in the act of rising to do so, I saw a party of men, of whom I distinctly counted fourteen, threading their well-known way through the marsh, and rapidly advancing towards the spot where I lay. They had already measured half the distance, and I might have seen them long before had I happened to look in that direction. I now congratulated myself that my troubles were over, and was pondering how I could best shew my gratitude to my deliverers, when the doubt was suggested to my mind whether they would prove deliverers or not. I kept my eye

steadfastly fixed upon their movements, and, as they drew nearer, beheld with dismay that they were all armed, two of them, who led the van, with old muskets, and the rest with staves, scythes, and bludgeons. It was plain that the old fool I had frightened away had described me to his countrymen as some savage monster, and this valiant band had come out against me, to hunt me to the death. I resolved at once to be sure of their object before they came to a disagreeable proximity; and with this view, started suddenly to my feet, and shouted as loud as I could.

My fears were but too well founded. At the first sound of my voice, the leaders recoiled a few steps upon the main body, who stood still for a few minutes, apparently in consultation, the result of which was, that the firearms changed owners, and two bold fellows stepped to the front, and, levelling their pieces, kept my naked body covered with their muzzles, and only refrained from pulling triggers until they should have arrived within killing distance. It was plain I had no time to lose if I would once more try the river, the only chance now remaining to me. I turned and hobbled away as fast as my wounded limb would let me, plunged into the nearest pool, sprawled through the next bog, crashed through the rushes, hopped along the dry ground upon one foot, and scrambled helter-skelter towards the river, expecting every moment to hear the report of the firearms, and to feel a handful of slugs in my body. Never shall I forget the horrors of that chase. I distanced my pursuers, however, and arrived at the margin of the stream without having once presented a fair target to their

aim. I did not pause long upon the brink of the flood. They were now yelling like blood-hounds, and their cries rung in my ears as I gained the very spot where I had landed in the morning, and where I again took to the water like a hunted deer, or rather like a hunted duck, for I dived under, with as gentle a splash as possible, and keeping beneath the surface as long as I could hold breath, rose at length a good fifty yards from the shore, and full two hundred yards lower down.

I had no great cause for congratulation at my escape. The sun was setting, night coming on, and here was I in the middle of the broad stream of the Danube, sweeping on at the rate of five or six miles an hour, with no other prospect in view than that of becoming food for fishes in a very few hours at furthest, unless I could succeed in making one of the islands I had seen in the morning. It was a strange thing that I felt no fatigue, even after swimming an hour. I had passed several small islands, but the rapid stream which they breasted broke away so furiously from their sides, that I had not strength to get near them. In their wake, I could see that the water was calm and tranquil enough, but that tranquil water I could not reach. By and by, as the darkness fell, I passed several islands much larger, and was about attempting to land upon one, when I caught sight of a glimmering light at a distance in the centre of the stream. I directed my course towards this in preference; and I perceived as I approached that it proceeded from a raft, moored off one of the islands, upon which the crew were probably cooking their evening meal. I knew that

if I approached this raft in front, I should inevitably be sucked under, and never see the light again; at the same time, if I gave it too wide a berth, I should as surely be carried past it, in which case I felt pretty certain that my last chance would be gone. I made a desperate effort at the very nick of time, and happily succeeded in laying hold of a rope, which was hanging in the water, by means of which I was swung round to the stern of the raft, upon which, in a small timber-hut, I could see the crew discussing their supper.

Now that the struggle was over, and my safety secure, all my courage and strength too vanished at once: I felt as weak as a child, and as pusillanimous as a woman, and the hot tears ran down my cheeks like rain. It was as much as I could do to hail the men, who sat laughing and chatting over their porridge not three yards from me, as I clutched the rope with the energy of a drowning man. They started up at the sound of my cry, and in an instant lifted me on board. They were Germans, fortunately; and I gave them to understand in a few words, that I had been bathing, and having been carried away by the stream, had narrowly escaped drowning. I was in no humour to put them in possession of my whole miserable adventure, which it is more than probable they would not have credited if I had. Having rubbed myself dry, one of them lent me a blouse, and offered me food, which, plain as it was, I was but too glad to accept; but before I had eaten a mouthful, an old man made his appearance, bearing slippers, cloak, and cap, and invited me to follow him

to his house upon the island, where I might pass the night, and cross over to the mainland in the morning. I followed him across a plank, and beneath the shadow of some willow-trees, to his humble dwelling. He told me that he and his family were the sole inhabitants of the island, and that he united the three professions of fisherman, innkeeper, and rope-maker, and thus managed to make a livelihood. His guests were almost exclusively the navigators on the river, who frequently moored for the night off his island, and partook of such entertainment as he could supply. He sent his fish to market when he caught more than he could consume, and he and his children made ropes and cordage, for which also he had a ready sale on the river. Pending this communication, he prepared me a substantial supper, to which I did ample justice, and then shewed me, at my request, to a small, neat chamber, where I sought and found the repose I so much needed.

I sank into a profound slumber, heavy and dreamless, within a minute after I lay down—the result, no doubt, of the utter exhaustion of every faculty, both of body and mind. Possessing a vigorous constitution, and a perfectly healthy frame, I escaped the reaction of nervous excitement, which most persons in similar circumstances would have undergone, and which in many would have terminated in fever and delirium, and perhaps death. But I did not escape altogether. After I had lain in total forgetfulness for some hours, my imagination woke up and plagued me with dreams of indescribable terror and alarm. I was

swimming for whole days and nights together in a shoreless sea, tossed by storms, and swarming with monsters, one or other of which was continually seizing me by the foot, and dragging me down; while over my head foul birds of prey, each and all with the terrified face of the poor wretch whom I had frightened in the marsh, and clutching firearms in their semi-human claws, were firing at my head, and swooping to devour me. To avoid their beaks, I dived madly into the depths below, where I had to do battle in the dark with the grim and shapeless monsters of the deep. Then, bursting with the retention of my breath, I rose again to the surface, and enjoyed a moment's pause, until the screaming harpies again gathered around me, and, convulsed with fear, I dived again as the vivid flash from their firearms dazzled my eyes. While performing one of these violent feats, occasioned by a flash which appeared to blaze over the whole sky, I woke suddenly. My landlord, the old fisherman, was standing by my bedside; he had drawn aside the curtains of my bed, and let the sunshine in upon my face, the hot gleam of which was doubtless the blazing flash of my dream. I laughed aloud when I found myself snug in bed, and proceeded to dress in the old man's best holiday suit, which he placed at my service. My wounded foot had well-nigh healed in the night, and I could walk comfortably. During breakfast, I gave the old man and his daughter the real history of my case, to their unspeakable astonishment, and consulted them as to my future operations. The fisherman volunteered to land me at a small village a few

miles below, from whence he would proceed with me to K—, where, upon representing my case to the magistrates, I should be furnished with the means of getting back to B—, and recovering my property.

This, in fact, was the only thing I could do. I engaged the fisherman to accompany me through the whole route; and as he had naturally no desire to lose sight of me, he made no objection. I had slept thirteen hours; and it was ten o'clock in the day, when the old man and I, and his two lads, embarked in the boat for the nearest village. We arrived there before noon, and he hired a conveyance in which we both proceeded to the place he had mentioned, a distance of some twenty miles, which we reached about three in the afternoon. But my companion had no more of either money or credit, and I was compelled to apply to the chief magistrate of the town, whom, by good-fortune, we found at his private residence. He proved a good-natured but rather fussy old gentleman; and when he had heard my story, which he interrupted with a thousand demonstrations of horror, alarm, and sympathy, insisted upon my sharing the hospitality of his house for the night, assuring me that it would be impossible to proceed that day. I gave a reluctant consent, upon his promising that he would put me in a condition to start at an early hour in the morning. Hereupon, consigning my companion to the charge of a servant, he ushered me into a saloon adjoining his study, and introduced me to his family, consisting of two grown-up sons, three daughters, and their mother, to whom I had

to tell my luckless adventures over again. That, however, was not the worst of it. As the hour of dinner drew near, the house began to fill with visitors: it was plain that my arrival, and the circumstances connected with it, had been regularly advertised through the town, and all the world was flocking to see the new 'lion' which the river had turned up. And certainly a lion I was, as the play-bills have it, 'for that night only.' I had to tell my story ten times over, and to submit to questionings and cross-questionings without number. All this, perhaps, was but natural enough, considering the circumstances; but it occasioned me no small annoyance; and feigning excessive fatigue, for which I had but too good excuse, I retired early to rest, leaving the assembled guests to pump the old fisherman, which they did to their hearts' content, and to talk over my adventures at leisure.

A servant awoke me before dawn. A carriage and post-horses stood at the door, and after I had made a hearty breakfast, my worthy host put into my hand a letter of introduction to his brother magistrate at B—. I bade him farewell with many sincere and hearty thanks, entered the carriage with my companion, and drove off. The distance we had to go may have been about fifty English miles; but the roads were in such wretched condition, and the cattle, which we changed seven times, of such an abominable breed, that night had fallen upon the town of B— before we entered it. I drove at once to the little *gasthof*, where, three days before, at the same hour, I had put up upon my arrival. The landlord bustled out to receive me as the carriage stopped at

the door; but though I identified him immediately, he shewed not the slightest symptom of recognising me. I told the driver to wait, and beckoning the old fisherman to follow, demanded to be shewn into a private room, and to be favoured with the landlord's company. He obeyed with the utmost alacrity, and taking a lamp from the hand of an attendant, led the way to a small room on the first floor.

'Well, Herr Bernstein,' I said, 'are you not glad to see me back again?'

'Most happy to see you, gracious sir,' said he; 'but have not the honour to recollect your gracious person.'

'Indeed! An Englishman, on a black horse, put up here three days ago at this hour—surely you recollect that?'

'Ah, too well I recollect that. Poor English gentleman—a countryman of yours, perhaps a friend—ah! dear God! drowned—unhappy man—carried away by the river in the morning before any of us were up.' Here he wrung his hands in evident sorrow: 'Ah, that stupid Grute! why did he let the gentleman bathe in the Danube?'

'Stop!' said I; 'let me put an end to your regret—I am that Englishman!'

'You—you!' cried he, as he staggered back into a seat. 'But it cannot be—it is impossible. I do not recollect you: you are deceiving me! Sir, it is a cruel jest.'

'It is no jest,' said I; 'Heaven be praised. Where is Grute, as you call him? He will tell you whether it is a jest.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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