

ZACCHEUS, THE DWARF

Written in 1856

By Christoph von Schmid

Chapter 1

The Resolve of One of No Account

“I swear I will not cut the hair of my beard until those heathen giants up yonder be Christian men—no, not if I lay waste the Einfischthal from end to end, and baptize as many in blood as I leave to be baptized in water!”

So spoke Baron Stephen d’Anniviers, and the uproar of applause which followed his speech, from both sides of the long table at which sat carousing his knights and men-at-arms, made the rafters of the great stone hall of the castle ring again. When the storm of shouts, and oaths, and laughter had subsided, a strange, high, sweet voice, which sounded neither like that of a man or woman, was heard to say,

“If my Lord Baron will lend me the precious Gospel Book, with the illuminated pages, and blue, and red, and golden letters, which is kept in the oaken chest in chapel, I will go up yonder into the Einfischthal, preach to the heathen folk that dwell there, and before another year they shall, the Lord helping, be Christian men, and my Lord the Baron shall shave his chin smooth and shed no blood.”

If the Baron’s speech had been received with acclamations, that of the misshapen little dwarf, who had climbed upon a stool and stood by his side, looking with earnest melancholy eyes into his face, caused a shout of laughter so loud and long that the very hounds in the courtyard leaped up and broke into furious barking at the uproar.

“You!” exclaimed the Baron, as soon as he could speak for laughing—“you, poor little old Zaccheus! Why this is the best joke I ever heard you utter!”

The little crippled creature went by the name of the Baron’s dwarf and was sometimes, too, called his jester, for though seldom merry himself, he was wonderfully quick-witted and said many things that made the rude soldiers, among whom he lived, laugh not a little.

“You will be the oddest apostle that ever preached Christian truth, that is very certain.”

“My lord,” said the dwarf, clinging to the arm of the Baron’s chair with great eagerness, while a faint blush colored his pale thin face and his great eyes filled with tears, “I do not jest now. I beseech your honorable lordship to let me go. Of a surety, though it seem strange to you that I should undertake what yourself and your brave men-at-arms have failed to do, I shall do it, if my lord will but lend me the beautiful Gospel Book.”

“Why, Zaccheus,” said the Knight, still laughing, but turning more attentively to the misshapen creature by his side, “dost you not know that not ten nights ago, I and a chosen train of my bravest followers went forth to try and scale the precipices into that inaccessible valley, because our pastor, the Bishop of Sion, said it was a shame for a Christian knight to be living within bugle-call of a valley full of unredeemed heathens. And do you not know that we chose the bed of the torrent of the Usenz, which flows down from their valley, and in this mid-summertime is well-nigh dry, and that we got well

halfway up among its rocks and precipices, when the accursed heathen giants, having knowledge of our approach, opened the sluices of all the water-courses, which they lay off from the river to their fields and pastures, and let down such a cataract of water upon us that we were swept off the rocks and tumbled one over the other down to the very bottom of the rocky wall we were attempting to scale. Have you not heard all this?—and will you come now and tell me that your poor little misshapen carcass shall achieve what all those stout fellows and myself failed in? Why, you crooked little atomy, you, the giants will eat you up alive for a frog, as you art!”

“My noble lord,” said poor Zaccheus, when the riotous laughter occasioned by this speech of the Baron’s subsided, “I know I am weak, and small, and deformed, and of no account to stalwart men and brave knights—but my Lord Baron,”—and here the little dwarf’s pale face again grew red, for he felt as if he was boasting, and moreover, of an advantage which not even his noble master, much less any of his followers, possessed—“I can read and I can speak the language of the Einfischthal, and they will not eat me up alive, for I have dwelt among them and am already well-known to them.”

These words of the dwarf’s created a sudden stillness in the hall. The Baron became grave and turning himself quite round to the little mannikin, inquired,

“Why, how and when was this, Zaccheus?”

“Your lordship will remember, it is not five years ago since the heathen people from the Einfischthal made a foray down into our lands and villages, laying their hands on whatever they could find that suited them. Their chief demand was for salt, of which your honorable lordship knows they have but little up yonder in their own valley.

“While the whole troop of them were scattered about, seizing like hungry wolves on whatever they could carry off, one tall and powerful giant—for he seemed such to me—stopped at my mother’s cottage door, and before I could roll out of his path, seized me up as easily as I would a two-month’s old kitten, and carried me on his back, home to his savage wife and children, for a sort of plaything, I suppose.”

“He took you for the salt of the earth, Zaccheus,” said the Baron, “and now, for aught I can see, you mayest verily prove so to him, for I am half inclined to let you go and try your power of persuasion with your former friends.”

“Oh good—good my Lord Baron, do even so, for the love of heaven!”

“How long didst you remain amongst this strange folk?”

“Nearly two years, my lord. And I taught them many things which they knew not before, and I learnt their language, but I could not teach them Christ’s holy truth, for I had not the Holy Book to teach them from. And I grew weary of living among heathens and savages, for so they were, though they were kind to me, and I escaped from them and came back home to my mother.

“But I will gladly go back again to carry salvation to the poor benighted folk, and if my Lord Baron will but trust me with the precious Book of God, I will set off this very night, and before break of day I shall again be in the Einfischthal.”

After some more objecting on the part of the Baron, and earnest pleading on that of his dwarf, the latter gained his petition. And with the great illuminated volume of the Gospel in his arms, he rolled, and writhed, and wriggled himself down from the castle gate to the valley, and not long after midnight, stood knocking at the door of a lonely cottage on the outskirts of the village.

Chapter 2

The Farewell in Hope

His mother, alarmed at such a summons at that hour, was amazed when she opened the door and saw her son standing in the moonlight before her. Much more amazed was she when he spoke to her as follows,

“Be not dismayed, my dear, kind mother, nought is amiss, but far otherwise. A great blessing has fallen on you poor, unworthy son. How often have I heard you weep and lament that all the godly teaching and training of that holy minister Anselm should have been in vain, since the miserable accident which dwarfed and crippled me for life, made it impossible I should ever be numbered among the holy ministers of Christ! How often have you wrung your hands and groaned over me, that the good learning that was to fit me for such a service had helped but to make a laughing-stock of me to the Baron’s rude soldiers, and no more than a jester to the Baron himself!

“O mother, the ways of heaven are past finding out! Behold! I go this night, even before the day dawns, up to the valley of the Einfischthal, to see if by any means I may not persuade the heathens there to hearken to the Gospel of our Saviour. See, I have here the beautiful Book of the holy, glad tidings. Wrap it strongly for me in a bag, and give me somewhat to hang it round my neck with, for it wearies my arms and hinders me from moving.

“And now, rejoice and bid God bless me! and farewell, dear mother! If my errand is blessed, to you will I come with the first good news thereof. If I return no more, thank God, when you shalt have wept your fill, that I died in His glorious service, for which I was too misshapen to live, and not smitten down in a drunken brawl and trampled upon, as I oft have feared I should be by the armed heels of my master’s rude followers.”

He turned from the door, and the widowed mother, with her breast full of holy awe and a tender thankfulness to God who had given her such a son, stood and watched with tearful eyes the poor distorted figure, the crooked legs, the long, thin arms, as they moved painfully and with a thousand strange contortions along the path where the moonlight threw a fantastic shadow of the dwarf, that seemed to mock his deformity with its own reflection.

Chapter 3

The Arrival of a Stranger

And now, my readers, how shall I describe to you the difficulties and dangers which the brave little Zaccheus encountered in that very path, or rather precipitous torrent bed, down which the Baron and all his followers had been overthrown by the rushing waters of the Usenz? The moon shone indeed high in the heavens, nor did she withdraw her light until the beautiful, clear, violet-grey of early dawn rendered it useless. But little availed either moonlight or dawn of day in the deep, black cleft up which poor Zaccheus was climbing.

The waters, no longer used by the mountaineers as a means of defence, had, it is true, been again withdrawn from their bed, and were running in a thousand little rills cut by the shepherds of the Einfischthal to fertilize their fields and meadows. But still enough poured down the rocky chasm to render the footing of the boldest climber hazardous. And you, my friend, with your straight body and agile limbs, might have found it difficult to have clambered up the steep and slippery stair of rocks which our dwarf apostle

climbed.

His Book, meanwhile, he carried with infinite difficulty in his arms, laying it (as you may have seen some little three-year old child going upstairs burdened with a darling dog or cat) tenderly and carefully on each step, to which he himself afterwards climbed. And thus, painfully lifting it, and after it his own poor, crooked body, from step to step of this rough staircase, worn by the white feet of the water in the everlasting rock, he at length reached the summit of the pass. And when the rosy flush of the morning was injected, like life-blood, into the cold sky, its lovely tint felt soft and warm on the wan face of the wearied dwarf, who had sunk exhausted on the grass of the valley, and lay sleeping on the very edge of the precipice up which he had so bravely climbed.

Here he was found by two of the shepherds set as night-watchers of this approach to the valley. He had crawled up unheard and unheeded by them. And great was the surprise and joy of one of them in recognizing the wise and good little dwarf whom he had carried off five years before from the valley below, and whose departure from the Einfischthal he and his family (who had all grown fond of Zaccheus) had often deplored.

The news of the arrival of a stranger in the Einfischthal created an immense excitement, and the shepherds ran together from all sides to see him, insomuch that the rumor of the event reached the ears even of the blind old Landaman, or Governor of the tribe, who, coming forth into the midst of the assembled people, commanded Zaccheus should be brought before him.

Now, you must know that one of the means by which the people of this Einfischthal had hitherto preserved their independence, and continued undisturbed in their heathen customs and religion, was through a certain law, by which every stranger who made his way into their valley was immediately thrown into the huge glacier at the foot of the Weisshorn, the vast snowy sides of which shut in the valley at the upper end with a heaven-high wall, upon whose peaked battlements the clouds seemed to rest as on a seat provided for them in their wanderings through the illimitable sky.

Now the very nature of the Einfischthal, and the extreme danger and difficulty of all the approaches to it, had hitherto effectually prevented its existence from being generally known, and the few unfortunate people who had accidentally penetrated into its walls, had never lived to teach others the way, for they had invariably been thrown into the blue-black gulf which yawned below the Weisshorn.

Zaccheus had formed an exception to this cruel law on the occasion of his first visit—partly because he was then hardly more than a child (for he was still very young, not much above twenty), and partly because of his strange shape and diminutive size, which made him appear to the tall and powerful race of shepherds who inhabited the valley more insignificant and harmless than he did to his friend the Baron and the men-at-arms of the castle. But the chief reason why he was not, like all other strangers who made their way into the Einfischthal, sacrificed to the Ice God whom the shepherds believed to inhabit the snowy folds of the Weisshorn, was, that he had not come up thither himself, but had been brought among them by one of themselves, carried away, as he had related to the Baron, by a huge mountaineer, who had taken him up as one might some odd insect or caterpillar that one should wish to examine leisurely at home.

Now, however, Zaccheus had of his own free will come among them. He was no longer a child, but had a dark line of soft brown hair above his upper lip, and though he was as misshapen and dwarfish as ever, even the ignorant savages of the Einfischthal themselves felt that there resided a strange power in his solemn, sad looking eyes, and pale broad forehead.

The blind old Landaman declared now that the stranger who had come amongst them must, according to their law, be delivered to the Ice Giant whom they worshipped. Many in the assembled throng had known Zaccheus before, and were even now kindly recognizing him, when those cruel words uttered by their stern old Governor caused a murmur to run through the crowd.

Chapter 4 His Destruction Demanded

Zaccheus climbed on a piece of rock opposite where the Governor had seated himself, and opening the Gospel with its magical illuminations, and glorious blue, and red, and golden letters, held it high above his head, with his thin long arms, and called aloud to the people to look how wonderful and beautiful a thing he had brought among them.

And truly, as the morning sun pointed with his fiery finger to the shining pages, it seemed to strike the wild beholders with a strange sudden spell. But the old Landaman was blind, and saw nothing of this glorious wonder, and asked why the people paused and did not obey his command. And then Zaccheus opened his lips and spake aloud, translating from the Latin Gospel which he held, the sacred story into the language of the Einfischthal.

The assembled throng around him listened in the deepest silence. The old Governor, with sightless eyes upraised and head upturned towards him, listened too like the rest, and the clear, sweet, piercing voice of Zaccheus rang through the sunny morning air, and seemed to float away up the valley, till it returned from the rocky walls that enclosed it in a marvellous faint melodious echo.

He paused at length, exhausted with fatigue, and a loud cry rose from the assembled people for his deliverance from the doom of death. In vain the stern voice of the Landaman insisted upon his destruction. They lifted the dwarf upon their shoulders and carried him home to the dwelling of his former friendly host, and here, at any rate for this one night, he slept secure, and thanked God as he did so that his holy work had had so prosperous a beginning.

Now, the next day, the shepherds went to their Governor, and besought the life of Zaccheus, but in vain. All they could obtain was that he should not be thrown into the glacier until he had made an end of telling them the wonderful stories contained in the strange Book he had brought with him. This, my friends, you will easily believe, was all that poor Zaccheus wished or desired. And now began the work, which he had so dauntlessly undertaken, to promise the fulfilment he so firmly believed would crown it.

You will readily believe that he did not hasten his recital of the sacred stories, not only for the sake of prolonging his life, but much more, in order to gain time wherein to impress upon the minds of his hearers the truth of all the wonderful things he related to them.

All through the summer, he labored thus, the people gathering themselves together from time to time from the remotest corners of the valley to listen to his teaching, and to learn the story of our Savior Christ. But now the first snows began to fall, the winter came down from the Alp crests into the deepest valleys. The people could no more come together from their isolated and scattered dwellings than if they had lived in

Iceland. The remainder of the reading was therefore postponed till the next summer.

Chapter 5 Strange & New Emotions

Zaccheus lived, in the meantime, on the best of whatever the valley afforded, in the friendly hut of a bard, who, by the Landaman's desire, employed his winter leisure in converting into lays and chants the most remarkable passages out of that portion of the Book with which Zaccheus had already made them acquainted. This was likely to prove a most useful assistance to the dwarf's project, and he applied himself to assist his host in his labor with so much zeal and efficiency, that by the next pasture season the wandering bard could carry from Alp to Alp the whole Gospel history, in hymns and holy lays, from the account of the birth of our Lord to that of His ascension.

The bard expressed the greatest desire to master the mystery of the characters themselves in which the sacred histories were written, but this Zaccheus steadily refused to teach him, thinking that the new and unaccustomed study might divert the bard from his more familiar mode of instructing the people, from which he hoped that they would derive the greatest benefit and his project the most useful assistance.

In the course of the following summer, the dwarf read the three other Gospels to the dwellers in the valley, while the bard wandered from mountain peak to mountain peak with his new songs, and often, through the whole moonlight night, the shepherds with their wives and children sat gathered round him under the spreading trees, and listened to his chanting of these holy things more eagerly than the crowded congregation of some fashionable church to their most popular preacher.

And thus, as Zaccheus had hoped, and confidently expected, it was not long before the Word of God began to act with power and life upon the dwellers in this heathen valley. The hearts of the people were filled with strange and new emotions, which stirred within them silently, waiting only some impulse from outward circumstances to manifest themselves openly with kindly warmth and enthusiasm.

For Zaccheus explained at every reading to his hearers, most fully and impressively, that the contents of his wondrous Book were not tales and legends, but a true history of that which had once been and befallen. Even the old Governor was conscious of an unusual disquiet in his mind—which, however, he did not so much attribute to the dwarf's reading and reciting of these strange matters before him, as to the fact of his having allowed him to remain so long alive, contrary to the laws and his own conscience, withholding from the great Ice Giant his accustomed sacrifice.

Chapter 6 Flung into the Glacier

As soon, therefore, as Zaccheus had finished reading the last leaf of his Gospel, the old Governor commanded the poor little dwarf apostle's Book to be hung round his neck, and he and it together to be flung into the glacier. And this time no revocation of the stern sentence could be hoped for—it was to be fulfilled.

With his precious Book hung round his neck, Zaccheus was led halting up the whole

length of the valley, followed by a vast crowd of the inhabitants, who flocked round him to see and hear him once more. He was not cast down, or fearful, but joyful as the first martyr Stephen, when he bore witness even with his life to the truth of God.

The further he went, the greater was the concourse of the people who gathered round him. Sometimes in order to rest his poor crooked limbs, and sometimes in the hope of gaining yet one last minute for the holy cause, he sat down here and there upon some projecting mass of rock, and for the last time addressed to his heathen listeners short earnest discourses and exhortations, again and again solemnly and affectionately impressing upon them that the only means of salvation possible for men was that purchased by the death of the Crucified and Holy One, who after death arose again and ascended into heaven.

Sorrow for the fate of the devoted little Zaccheus might be read on the countenance of all who surrounded him, but the blue glacier above the Weisshorn thundered louder than it had done through the whole summer, just as he finished speaking, and the Ice Giant seemed to be calling for his lingering prey. Those who conducted him, therefore, suddenly hastened their steps, and having reached the glacier, they let him down, rather than cast him, into a new cleft in the ice vault, and immediately all fled from the place. For when the glacier had swallowed its victim, it thundered even louder than before, and all the people dreaded that the Ice Giant should open some other hideous mouth and engulf them together with poor Zaccheus.

Chapter 7

In the Icy Heart of the Glacier

Now the cleft into which they had lowered him had sprung open in the side of the glacier just before he made his appearance in the valley, and it fortunately proved to be of such a formation that instead of falling to any great depth, the dwarf remained sitting or rather hanging midway under the icy vault. In this position, it was still possible for him to deliberate upon the best means of extricating himself from the abyss.

One glance upwards showed him that climbing in that direction was utterly hopeless. Commending therefore his soul repeatedly to the Lord, he began to crawl, and slide, and fall, and creep downwards. The precious Book of the Gospels hung heavily round his neck, and more than once impeded his progress, and put him in imminent peril of instantaneous destruction.

More than once, his escape seemed to depend upon his freeing himself from this dangerous burden, but he would far sooner have left his life than his precious Book in the icy bowels of the glacier. And thus nearly frozen, and more dead than alive, he dropped at last down into the channel through which the melted water of the glacier flowed out from below its huge mountain masses.

And now the brave little dwarf had a winning game of it—with his holy treasure on his back, he crawled on all fours till he arrived at the vault where the ice cavern let forth its stream into the valley. And now, if Zaccheus had thought only of his own life and safety, he would have concealed himself here or somewhere near, and waited till night to find some means of returning unmolested to his home, which, from the knowledge he had gained both of the valley itself and its inhabitants, he might quite easily have done.

But he was determined to bear his testimony to the Lord, who had mercifully

vouchsafed him such a deliverance, and at the peril of being once more cast back into the jaws of death, he made his way back into the very midst of the assembled people, who had returned from the Mer de Glace by a circuitous path, and before whose astonished eyes he now presented himself, wet from head to foot, pale and exhausted, but alive, and holding his wondrous Book in his hands.

Chapter 8

Triumph Over the Ice God

The shepherds stood for one moment amazed and silent, as the people in the house of Mary, the mother of Peter, when after his miraculous escape from prison he suddenly stood in the midst of them. Then, with one accord, they fell down before him, as though he had been an apparition out of the Walhalla.

But Zaccheus beckoned to them with his hand, and bidding them arise and leave off kissing his feet, he with a feeble voice but a mighty spirit called on them to praise the true God and only Savior. He who leads His children out of every bodily and spiritual danger, and who, as their own eyes now beheld, had triumphed even over the power of their Ice God.

When he had made an end of speaking, the tribe that surrounded him were swayed, and rolled to and fro like the corn on the hills when the wind sweeps over them. Two powerful young men raised the weak and weary Zaccheus in their arms, and seating him on a large shield, bore him to the dwelling of the blind Governor, to whom a deputation of the shepherds related the history of the dwarf's miraculous escape.

The old man listened attentively, and the ice rind of his stern heart cracked and melted. He spread out his hand and bade them lead him forth among the people, and then uplifting his voice, he cried aloud towards heaven, "Jesus of Nazareth is our God and Zaccheus is His priest!" and the people uttered amid shouts that resounded from mountain to mountain like rolling thunder, "Jesus of Nazareth is our God and Zaccheus is His priest!"

Chapter 9

The Baron Gets a Clean Chin

Now, Zaccheus refused to take upon himself this dignity, for the priest of the people had hitherto been their Landaman also, according to their most ancient custom. He told the old man that they must forthwith send down into the valley and entreat that some should come up among them. This was immediately resolved upon.

The very next day an embassy, with Zaccheus at their head, went down to Wallis, to apprise the Bishop of Sitten that the inhabitants of the Einfischthal wished to place themselves under the guidance of his pastoral staff, retaining, however, their ancient rights and freedoms, and all the customs and manners of their ancestors that were not incompatible with the Christian profession.

Joyfully with this embassy returned Zaccheus to Siders, and paid his duty first to his mother and then to the Baron. Great was the amazement with which he was everywhere received and his wonderful story heard. The Baron forthwith made himself a clean chin,

and then, mounting Zaccheus and his companions on sumptuously-adorned mules, he rode himself with them to Sitten.

The pastor received the procession on the threshold of the church, and with tears of joy in his eyes, blessed Zaccheus and his companions. Zaccheus was made an official pastor and then returned with several deacons into the Einfischthal. The regular Christian instruction of the people began forthwith, and the following year, at the feast of Pentecost, the old blind Landaman and all his people were baptized in the rushing waters of the Usenz.

THE END

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