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Peter Schlemihl

Adelbert von Chamisso

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Contents:

Introduction by Henry Morley

Peter Schlemihl by Adelbert Chamisso

Peter Schlemihl

Appendix

Preface by the Editor

Brief Sketch of Chamisso's Life

From the Baron de la Motte Fouqui

The Story Without An End by Carodi translated by Sarah Austin

Hymns To Night by Novalis translated by Henry Morley

INTRODUCTION.

"Peter Schlemihl," one of the pleasantest fancies of the days when Germany delighted in romance, was first published in 1814, and was especially naturalised in England by association with the genius of George Cruikshank, who enriched a translation of it with some of his happiest work as an illustrator. An account of the book and its author is here reprinted at the end of the tale, as originally given by the translator. To this account one or two notes may be added. Louis Charles Adelaide de Chamisso de Boncourt was born on the 27th of January, 1781, at the Chateau of Boncourt, in Champagne, which he made the subject of one of his most beautiful lyrics. He belonged to a family faithful to Louis XVI., that fled to Würzburg from the fury of the French Revolution. Thus he was taken to Germany a child of nine, and was left there when the family, with other emigrants, returned to France in 1801. At fifteen he had Teutonised his name to Adelbert von Chamisso, and was appointed page to the Queen of Prussia. In the war that came afterwards, for a very short time he bore arms against the French, but being one of a garrison taken in the captured fort of Hamlin, he and his comrades had to pledge their honour that they would not again bear arms against France during that war. After the war he visited France. His parents then were dead, and though he stayed in France some years, he wrote from France to a friend, "I am German heart and soul, and cannot feel at home here." He wandered irresolutely, then became Professor of Literature in a gymnasium in La Vendie. Still he was restless. In 1812 he set off for a walk in Switzerland, returned to Germany, and took to the study of anatomy. In 1813, Napoleon's expedition to Russia and the peril to France from legions marching upon Paris caused to Chamisso suffering and confusion of mind.

It is often said that his sense of isolation between interests of the land of his forefathers and the land of his adoption makes itself felt through all the wild playfulness of "Peter Schlemihl," which was at this time written, when Chamisso's age was about thirty-two. A letter of his to the Councillor Trinius, in Petersburg, tells how he

came to write it. He had lost on a pedestrian tour his hat, his knapsack, his gloves, and his pocket handkerchief - the chief movables about him. His friend Fouqui asked him whether he hadn't also lost his shadow? The friends pleased their fancies in imagining what would have happened to him if he had. Not long afterwards he was reading in La Fontaine of a polite man who drew out of his pocket whatever was asked for. Chamisso thought, He will be bringing out next a coach and horses. Out of these hints came the fancy of "Peter Schlemihl, the Shadowless Man." In all thought that goes with invention of a poet, there are depths as well as shallows, and the reader may get now and then a peep into the depths. He may find, if he will, in a man's shadow that outward expression of himself which shows that he has been touched, like others, by the light of heaven. But essentially the story is a poet's whim. Later writings of Chamisso proved him to be one of the best lyric poets of the romance school of his time, entirely German in his tone of thought. His best poem, "Salas y Gomez," describes the feeling of a solitary on a sea-girt rock, living on eggs of the numberless sea-birds until old age, when a ship is in sight, and passes him, and his last agony of despair is followed by a triumph in the strength of God.

"Alone and world-forsaken let me die;
Thy Grace is all my wealth, for all my loss:
On my bleached bones out of the southern sky
Thy Love will look down from the starry cross."

The "Story Without an End" - a story of the endless beauty of Creation - is from a writer who has no name on the rolls of fame. The little piece has been made famous among us by the good will of Sarah Austin. The child who enjoyed it, and for whom she made the delicate translation which here follows next after Chamisso's "Peter Schlemihl," was that only daughter who became Lady Duff-Gordon, and with whom we have made acquaintance in this Library as the translator of "The Amber Witch."

To make up the tale of pages in this little book without breaking its uniformity, I have added a translation of the "Hymns to Night" of

Novalis. It is a translation made by myself seven-and-forty years ago, and printed in a student's magazine that I then edited. "Novalis" was the name assumed by a poet, Friedrich von Hardenberg, who died on the 25th March, 1801, aged twenty-nine. He was bred among the Moravian brethren, and then sent to the University of Jena. Two years after his marriage to a young wife, Sophie von K|hn, she died. That was in 1797. At the same time he lost a brother who was very dear to him. It was then - four years before his own death - that he wrote his "Hymns to Night."

H. M.

PETER SCHLEMIHL, THE SHADOWLESS MAN.

INTRODUCTORY EPISTLE FROM
A. VON CHAMISSO TO JULIUS EDWARD HITZIG.

You, who forget nobody, must surely remember one Peter Schlemihl, whom you used to meet occasionally at my house - a long-legged youth, who was considered stupid and lazy, on account of his awkward and careless air. I was sincerely attached to him. You cannot have forgotten him, Edward. He was on one occasion the hero of our rhymes, in the hey-day of our youthful spirits; and I recollect taking him one evening to a poetical tea-party, where he fell asleep while I was writing, without even waiting to hear my effusion: and this reminds me of a witticism of yours respecting him. You had already seen him, I know not where or when, in an old black frock-coat, which, indeed, he constantly wore; and you said, "He would be a lucky fellow if his soul were half as immortal as his coat," so little opinion had you of him. I loved him, however: and to this very Schlemihl, of whom for many years I had wholly lost sight, I am indebted for the little volume which I communicate to you, Edward, my most intimate friend, my second self, from whom I have no secrets; - to you, and of course our Fouqui, I commit them, who like you is intimately entwined about my dearest affections, - to him I communicate them only as a friend, but not as a poet; for you can easily imagine how unpleasant it would be if a secret confided to me by an honest man, relying implicitly on my friendship and honour, were to be exposed to the public in a poem.

One word more as to the manner in which I obtained these sheets: yesterday morning early, as soon as I was up, they were brought to me. An extraordinary-looking man, with a long grey beard, and wearing an old black frock-coat with a botanical case hanging at his side, and slippers over his boots, in the damp, rainy weather, had just been inquiring for me, and left me these papers, saying he came from Berlin.

ADELBERT VON CHAMISSO.

CHAPTER I.

After a prosperous, but to me very wearisome, voyage, we came at last into port. Immediately on landing I got together my few effects; and, squeezing myself through the crowd, went into the nearest and humblest inn which first met my gaze. On asking for a room the waiter looked at me from head to foot, and conducted me to one. I asked for some cold water, and for the correct address of Mr. Thomas John, which was described as being "by the north gate, the first country-house to the right, a large new house of red and white marble, with many pillars." This was enough. As the day was not yet far advanced, I untied my bundle, took out my newly-turned black coat, dressed myself in my best clothes, and, with my letter of recommendation, set out for the man who was to assist me in the attainment of my moderate wishes.

After proceeding up the north street, I reached the gate, and saw the marble columns glittering through the trees. Having wiped the dust from my shoes with my pocket-handkerchief and readjusted my cravat, I rang the bell - offering up at the same time a silent prayer. The door flew open, and the porter sent in my name. I had soon the honour to be invited into the park, where Mr. John was walking with a few friends. I recognised him at once by his corpulency and self-complacent air. He received me very well - just as a rich man receives a poor devil; and turning to me, took my letter. "Oh, from my brother! it is a long time since I heard from him: is he well? - Yonder," he went on, - turning to the company, and pointing to a distant hill - "Yonder is the site of the new building." He broke the seal without discontinuing the conversation, which turned upon riches. "The man," he said, "who does not possess at least a million is a poor wretch." "Oh, how true!" I exclaimed, in the fulness of my heart. He seemed pleased at this, and replied with a smile, "Stop here, my dear friend; afterwards I shall, perhaps, have time to tell you what I think of this," pointing to the letter, which he then put into his pocket, and turned round to the company, offering his arm to a young lady: his example was followed by the other gentlemen, each politely escorting a lady; and the whole party proceeded to-

wards a little hill thickly planted with blooming roses.

I followed without troubling any one, for none took the least further notice of me. The party was in high spirits - lounging about and jesting - speaking sometimes of trifling matters very seriously, and of serious matters as triflingly - and exercising their wit in particular to great advantage on their absent friends and their affairs. I was too ignorant of what they were talking about to understand much of it, and too anxious and absorbed in my own reflections to occupy myself with the solution of such enigmas as their conversation presented.

By this time we had reached the thicket of roses. The lovely Fanny, who seemed to be the queen of the day, was obstinately bent on plucking a rose-branch for herself, and in the attempt pricked her finger with a thorn. The crimson stream, as if flowing from the dark-tinted rose, tinged her fair hand with the purple current. This circumstance set the whole company in commotion; and court-plaster was called for. A quiet, elderly man, tall, and meagre-looking, who was one of the company, but whom I had not before observed, immediately put his hand into the tight breast-pocket of his old-fashioned coat of grey sarsnet, pulled out a small letter-case, opened it, and, with a most respectful bow, presented the lady with the wished-for article. She received it without noticing the giver, or thanking him. The wound was bound up, and the party proceeded along the hill towards the back part, from which they enjoyed an extensive view across the green labyrinth of the park to the wide-spreading ocean. The view was truly a magnificent one. A slight speck was observed on the horizon, between the dark flood and the azure sky. "A telescope!" called out Mr. John; but before any of the servants could answer the summons the grey man, with a modest bow, drew his hand from his pocket, and presented a beautiful Dollond's telescope to Mr. John, who, on looking through it, informed the company that the speck in the distance was the ship which had sailed yesterday, and which was detained within sight of the haven by contrary winds. The telescope passed from hand to hand, but was not returned to the owner, whom I gazed at with astonishment, and could not conceive how so large an instrument could have proceeded from so small a pocket. This, however,

seemed to excite surprise in no one; and the grey man appeared to create as little interest as myself.

Refreshments were now brought forward, consisting of the rarest fruits from all parts of the world, served up in the most costly dishes. Mr. John did the honours with unaffected grace, and addressed me for the second time, saying, "You had better eat; you did not get such things at sea." I acknowledged his politeness with a bow, which, however, he did not perceive, having turned round to speak with some one else.

The party would willingly have stopped some time here on the declivity of the hill, to enjoy the extensive prospect before them, had they not been apprehensive of the dampness of the grass. "How delightful it would be," exclaimed some one, "if we had a Turkey carpet to lay down here!" The wish was scarcely expressed when the man in the grey coat put his hand in his pocket, and, with a modest and even humble air, pulled out a rich Turkey carpet, embroidered in gold. The servant received it as a matter of course, and spread it out on the desired spot; and, without any ceremony, the company seated themselves on it. Confounded by what I saw, I gazed again at the man, his pocket, and the carpet, which was more than twenty feet in length and ten in breadth; and rubbed my eyes, not knowing what to think, particularly as no one saw anything extraordinary in the matter.

I would gladly have made some inquiries respecting the man, and asked who he was, but knew not to whom I should address myself, for I felt almost more afraid of the servants than of their master. At length I took courage, and stepping up to a young man who seemed of less consequence than the others, and who was more frequently standing by himself, I begged of him, in a low tone, to tell me who the obliging gentleman was in the grey cloak. "That man who looks like a piece of thread just escaped from a tailor's needle?" "Yes; he who is standing alone yonder." "I do not know," was the reply; and to avoid, as it seemed, any further conversation with me, he turned away, and spoke of some common-place matters with a neighbour.

The sun's rays now being stronger, the ladies complained of feeling

oppressed by the heat; and the lovely Fanny, turning carelessly to the grey man, to whom I had not yet observed that any one had addressed the most trifling question, asked him if, perhaps, he had not a tent about him. He replied, with a low bow, as if some unmerited honour had been conferred upon him; and, putting his hand in his pocket, drew from it canvas, poles, cord, iron - in short, everything belonging to the most splendid tent for a party of pleasure. The young gentlemen assisted in pitching it: and it covered the whole carpet: but no one seemed to think that there was anything extraordinary in it.

I had long secretly felt uneasy - indeed, almost horrified; but how was this feeling increased when, at the next wish expressed, I saw him take from his pocket three horses! Yes, Adelbert, three large beautiful steeds, with saddles and bridles, out of the very pocket whence had already issued a letter-case, a telescope, a carpet twenty feet broad and ten in length, and a pavilion of the same extent, with all its appurtenances! Did I not assure thee that my own eyes had seen all this, thou wouldst certainly disbelieve it.

This man, although he appeared so humble and embarrassed in his air and manners, and passed so unheeded, had inspired me with such a feeling of horror by the unearthly paleness of his countenance, from which I could not avert my eyes, that I was unable longer to endure it.

I determined, therefore, to steal away from the company, which appeared no difficult matter, from the undistinguished part I acted in it. I resolved to return to the town, and pay another visit to Mr. John the following morning, and, at the same time, make some inquiries of him relative to the extraordinary man in grey, provided I could command sufficient courage. Would to Heaven that such good fortune had awaited me!

I had stolen safely down the hill, through the thicket of roses, and now found myself on an open plain; but fearing lest I should be met out of the proper path, crossing the grass, I cast an inquisitive glance around, and started as I beheld the man in the grey cloak advancing towards me. He took off his hat, and made me a lower

bow than mortal had ever yet favoured me with. It was evident that he wished to address me; and I could not avoid encountering him without seeming rude. I returned his salutation, therefore, and stood bareheaded in the sunshine as if rooted to the ground. I gazed at him with the utmost horror, and felt like a bird fascinated by a serpent.

He affected himself to have an air of embarrassment. With his eyes on the ground, he bowed several times, drew nearer, and at last, without looking up, addressed me in a low and hesitating voice, almost in the tone of a suppliant: "Will you, sir, excuse my impertunity in venturing to intrude upon you in so unusual a manner? I have a request to make - would you most graciously be pleased to allow me - !" "Hold! for Heaven's sake!" I exclaimed; "what can I do for a man who" - I stopped in some confusion, which he seemed to share. After a moment's pause, he resumed: "During the short time I have had the pleasure to be in your company, I have - permit me, sir, to say - beheld with unspeakable admiration your most beautiful shadow, and remarked the air of noble indifference with which you, at the same time, turn from the glorious picture at your feet, as if disdainful to vouchsafe a glance at it. Excuse the boldness of my proposal; but perhaps you would have no objection to sell me your shadow?" He stopped, while my head turned round like a mill-wheel. What was I to think of so extraordinary a proposal? To sell my shadow! "He must be mad," thought I; and assuming a tone more in character with the submissiveness of his own, I replied, "My good friend, are you not content with your own shadow? This would be a bargain of a strange nature indeed!"

"I have in my pocket," he said, "many things which may possess some value in your eyes: for that inestimable shadow I should deem the highest price too little."

A cold shuddering came over me as I recollected the pocket; and I could not conceive what had induced me to style him "*good friend*," which I took care not to repeat, endeavouring to make up for it by a studied politeness.

I now resumed the conversation: - "But, Sir - excuse your humble

servant - I am at a loss to comprehend your meaning, - my shadow?
- how can I?"

"Permit me," he exclaimed, interrupting me, "to gather up the noble image as it lies on the ground, and to take it into my possession. As to the manner of accomplishing it, leave that to me. In return, and as an evidence of my gratitude, I shall leave you to choose among all the treasures I have in my pocket, among which are a variety of enchanting articles, not exactly adapted for you, who, I am sure, would like better to have the wishing-cap of Fortunatus, all made new and sound again, and a lucky purse which also belonged to him."

"Fortunatus's purse!" cried I; and, great as was my mental anguish, with that one word he had penetrated the deepest recesses of my soul. A feeling of giddiness came over me, and double ducats glittered before my eyes.

"Be pleased, gracious sir, to examine this purse, and make a trial of its contents." He put his hand in his pocket, and drew forth a large strongly stitched bag of stout Cordovan leather, with a couple of strings to match, and presented it to me. I seized it - took out ten gold pieces, then ten more, and this I repeated again and again. Instantly I held out my hand to him. "Done," said I; "the bargain is made: my shadow for the purse." "Agreed," he answered; and, immediately kneeling down, I beheld him, with extraordinary dexterity, gently loosen my shadow from the grass, lift it up, fold it together, and, at last put it in his pocket. He then rose, bowed once more to me, and directed his steps towards the rose bushes. I fancied I heard him quietly laughing to himself. However, I held the purse fast by the two strings. The earth was basking beneath the brightness of the sun; but I presently lost all consciousness.

On recovering my senses, I hastened to quit a place where I hoped there was nothing further to detain me. I first filled my pockets with gold, then fastened the strings of the purse round my neck, and concealed it in my bosom. I passed unnoticed out of the park, gained the high road, and took the way to the town. As I was thoughtfully approaching the gate, I heard some one behind me

exclaiming, "Young man! young man! you have lost your shadow!" I turned, and perceived an old woman calling after me. "Thank you, my good woman," said I; and throwing her a piece of gold for her well-intended information, I stepped under the trees. At the gate, again, it was my fate to hear the sentry inquiring where the gentleman had left his shadow; and immediately I heard a couple of women exclaiming, "Jesu Maria! the poor man has no shadow." All this began to depress me, and I carefully avoided walking in the sun; but this could not everywhere be the case: for in the next broad street I had to cross, and, unfortunately for me, at the very hour in which the boys were coming out of school, a humpbacked lout of a fellow - I see him yet - soon made the discovery that I was without a shadow, and communicated the news, with loud outcries, to a knot of young urchins. The whole swarm proceeded immediately to reconnoitre me, and to pelt me with mud. "People," cried they, "are generally accustomed to take their shadows with them when they walk in the sunshine."

In order to drive them away I threw gold by handfuls among them, and sprang into a hackney-coach which some compassionate spectators sent to my rescue.

As soon as I found myself alone in the rolling vehicle I began to weep bitterly. I had by this time a misgiving that, in the same degree in which gold in this world prevails over merit and virtue, by so much one's shadow excels gold; and now that I had sacrificed my conscience for riches, and given my shadow in exchange for mere gold, what on earth would become of me?

As the coach stopped at the door of my late inn, I felt much perplexed, and not at all disposed to enter so wretched an abode. I called for my things, and received them with an air of contempt, threw down a few gold pieces, and desired to be conducted to a first-rate hotel. This house had a northern aspect, so that I had nothing to fear from the sun. I dismissed the coachman with gold; asked to be conducted to the best apartment, and locked myself up in it as soon as possible.

Imagine, my friend, what I then set about? O my dear Chamisso!

even to thee I blush to mention what follows.

I drew the ill-fated purse from my bosom; and, in a sort of frenzy that raged like a self-fed fire within me, I took out gold - gold - gold - more and more, till I strewed it on the floor, trampled upon it, and feasting on its very sound and brilliancy, added coins to coins, rolling and revelling on the gorgeous bed, until I sank exhausted.

Thus passed away that day and evening; and as my door remained locked, night found me still lying on the gold, where, at last, sleep overpowered me.

Then I dreamed of thee, and fancied I stood behind the glass door of thy little room, and saw thee seated at thy table between a skeleton and a bunch of dried plants; before thee lay open the works of Haller, Humboldt, and Linnfus; on thy sofa a volume of Goethe, and the Enchanted Ring. I stood a long time contemplating thee, and everything in thy apartment; and again turning my gaze upon thee, I perceived that thou wast motionless - thou didst not breathe - thou wast dead.

I awoke - it seemed yet early - my watch had stopped. I felt thirsty, faint, and worn out; for since the preceding morning I had not tasted food. I now cast from me, with loathing and disgust, the very gold with which but a short time before I had satiated my foolish heart. Now I knew not where to put it - I dared not leave it lying there. I examined my purse to see if it would hold it, - impossible! Neither of my windows opened on the sea. I had no other resource but, with toil and great fatigue, to drag it to a huge chest which stood in a closet in my room; where I placed it all, with the exception of a handful or two. Then I threw myself, exhausted, into an arm-chair, till the people of the house should be up and stirring. As soon as possible I sent for some refreshment, and desired to see the landlord.

I entered into some conversation with this man respecting the arrangement of my future establishment. He recommended for my personal attendant one Bendel, whose honest and intelligent countenance immediately prepossessed me in his favour. It is this indi-