

ADELBERT VON CHAMISSO

PETER
SCHLEMIHL

THE SHADOWLESS MAN

eGURO

Table Of Contents

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Peter Schlemihl

The Shadowless Man

To my Friend Wangner

Come to the land of shadows for awhile,
And seek for truth and wisdom! Here below,
In the dark misty paths of fear and woe,
We weary out our souls and waste our toil;
But if we harvest in the richer soil
Of towering thoughts—where holy breezes blow,
And everlasting flowers in beauty smile—
No disappointment shall the labourer know.
Methought I saw a fair and sparkling gem
In this rude casket—but thy shrewder eye,
Wangner! a jewell'd coronet could descry.
Take, then, the bright, unreal diadem!
Worldlings may doubt and smile insultingly,
The hidden stores of truth are not for *them*.

J. B.

To the Same, from Fouqué

We must, dear Edward, protect the history of poor Schlemihl—and so protect it that it may be concealed from the eyes that are not to look into it. This is a disagreeable business; for of such eyes there is a multitude, and what mortal can decide what shall be the fate of a MS. which is more hard to guard than even an uttered word. In truth, I feel as if my head were turning round, and in my anguish jump into the abyss—let the whole affair be printed!

But, Edward! there are really stronger and better grounds for this decision. Unless I am wholly deceived, there beat in our beloved Germany many hearts which are able and worthy to understand poor Schlemihl, and a tranquil smile will light upon the countenance of many an honest countryman of ours at the p. 10 bitter sport in which life with him—and the simple sport in which he with himself is engaged. And you, Edward, you, looking into this so sincerely-grounded book, and thinking how many unknown hearts this may learn with us to love it—you will let a drop of balsam fall into the deep wound, which death hath inflicted upon you and all that love you.

And to conclude: there is—I know there is, from manifold experience—a genius that takes charge of every printed book and delivers it into the appropriate hands, and if not always, yet very often keeps at home the undeserving: that genius holds the key to every true production of heart and soul, and opens and closes it with never-failing dexterity.

To this genius, my much beloved Schlemihl! I confide thy smiles and thy tears, and thus to God commend them.

FOUQUÉ.

Neunhausen, May 31, 1814.

To Fouqué, from Hitzig

We have done, then, the desperate deed: there is Schlemihl's story which we were to preserve to ourselves as our own secret, and lo! not only Frenchmen and Englishmen, Dutchmen and Spaniards have translated it, and Americans have reprinted it from the English text, as I announced to my own erudite Berlin, but now in our beloved Germany a new edition appears with the English etchings, which the illustrious Cruikshank sketched from the life, and wider still will the story be told. Not a word didst thou mutter to me in 1814, of the publication of the MS., and did I not deem thy reckless enterprise suitably punished by the complaints of our Chamisso, in his Voyage round the World from 1815 to 1818—complaints urged in Chili and Kamtschatka, and uttered even to his departed friend Tameramaia of Owahee, I should even now demand of you crowning retribution.

However—this by the by—bygones are bygones—and you are right in this—that many, many friendly ones have looked upon the little book with affection during the thirteen eventful years since it saw the world's light. I shall never forget the hour when I first read it to Hoffmann. He was beside himself with delight and eagerness, and hung upon my lips till I got to the end. He could not wait, not he, to make the personal acquaintance of the poet;—but though he hates all imitation, he could not withstand the temptation to copy—though not very felicitously—the idea of the lost shadow in the lost mirror picture of Crasinus Spekhn, in his tale of the “Last Night of the Year.” Yes, even among children has our marvellous history found its way, for on a bright winter evening, as I was going up the Borough-street with its narrator, a boy busied with his sledge laughed at him, upon which he tucked the boy under his bear-skin mantle—you know

it well—and while he carried him he remained perfectly quiet until he was set down on the footway—and then—having made off to a distance, where he felt safe as if nothing had happened, he shouted aloud to his captor —“Nay, stop, Peter Schlemihl!”

Methinks, the honourable scarecrow, clad now in trist and fashionable attire, may be welcome to those who never saw him in his modest kurtka of 1814. These and those will be surprised in the botanizing, circumnavigating—the once well-appointed Royal Prussian officer, in the historiographer of the illustrious Peter Schlemihl, to discover a lyric whose poetical heart is rightly fixed, whether he sing in Malayan or Lithuanian.

Thanks, then, dear Fouqué, heartfelt thanks, for the launching of the first edition, and with our friends, receive my wishes for the prosperity of the second.

Edward Hitzig.

Berlin, January, 1827.

To my old Friend, Peter Schlemihl.

Well! years and years have pass'd,—and lo! thy writing
Comes to my hands again,—and, strange to say,
I think of times when the world's school, inviting
Our early friendship, new before us lay;—
Now I can laugh at foolish shame—delighting
In thee, for I am old—my hair is grey,—
And I will call thee friend, as then—not coldly,
But proudly to the world—and claim thee boldly.

My dear, dear Friend! the cunning air hath led me
Through paths less dark and less perplexed than thine,
Struggling for blue, bright dawns, have I sped me,
But little, little glory has been mine.

Yet can the Grey Man boast not that he had me
Fast by *my* shadow! Nay! he must resign
His claims on me,—my shadow's mine. I boast it,—
I had it from the first, and never lost it.

On me—though guiltless as a child—the throng
Flung all their mockery of thy naked being,—
And is the likeness then so very strong?
They shouted for *my* shadow—which, though seeing,
They swore they saw not—and, still bent on wrong,
Said they were blind; and then put forth their glee in
Peals upon peals of laughter! Well—we bear
With patience—aye, with joy—the conscience clear.

And what—what is the Shadow? may I ask ye,
Who am myself so wearily asked.
Is it too high a problem, then, to task ye?
And shall not the malignant world be tasked?
The flights of nineteen thousand days unmask ye,
They have brought wisdom—in whose trains I basked,
And while I gave to shadows, being—saw
Being, as shadows, from life's scene withdraw.

Give me thy hand, Schlemihl—take mine, my friend:
On, on,—we leave the future to the Grey Man,
Careless about the world,—our hearts shall blend
In firmer, stronger union—come away, man!