

PETER SCHLEMIHL



Adalbert von Chamisso

LIBRARIES BOARD OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

COUNTRY LENDING SERVICE

INSTRUCTIONS TO READERS IN MUNICIPAL LIBRARIES

Readers borrowing this book directly from the Country Lending Service need only take note of items 4 and 5.

1. Time Allowed for Reading.—Normally two weeks. See slip inserted at end of volume.

2. Extension of Time.—If required, an extension of time will be granted for a further period, provided the book is not wanted by another reader. No more than two consecutive extensions will be granted for a book. In writing or telephoning about extensions, please quote the number of your Borrower's Ticket, the Call Number of the book and the date when it is due for return.

3. Waiting Lists.—If the book that you want is out on loan, we will, if you wish, add your name to a waiting list and you will be notified when the book is available. A fee of sixpence is charged for this service.

4. CARE OF BOOKS.—Borrowers are responsible for books while on loan to them, and they should draw the attention of the Librarian to any mutilations or other injuries noticed by them. Please do not attempt any book repairs at home.

5. Changes of Address.—These should be reported without delay.

PETER SCHLEMIHL

Uniform with this edition:

A VILLAGE ROMEO AND JULIET
Gottfried Keller

MEMOIRS OF A GOOD-FOR-NOTHING
Eichendorff

VIOLA TRICOLOUR AND CURATOR CARSTEN
Theodor Storm

THE SUFFERINGS OF YOUNG WERTHER
Goethe

MOZART'S JOURNEY TO PRAGUE
Eduard Mörike

THE WALK AND OTHER STORIES
Robert Walser

PETER SCHLEMIHL
BY
ADALBERT VON CHAMISSO

TRANSLATED BY
LEOPOLD VON LOEWENSTEIN-WERTHEIM



LONDON
JOHN CALDER

FIRST PUBLISHED IN THIS TRANSLATION FROM THE
GERMAN IN 1957 BY JOHN CALDER [PUBLISHERS]
LIMITED, 17 SACKVILLE STREET, LONDON, W.1.

© JOHN CALDER [PUBLISHERS] LTD, OCTOBER 1957

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY CLARKE, DOBLE &
BRENDON, LIMITED, OAKFIELD PRESS, CATTEDOWN,
PLYMOUTH

CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	9
<i>Chamisso: principal dates</i>	13
<i>Peter Schlemihl</i>	15

INTRODUCTION

LOUIS CHARLES ADELAIDE DE CHAMISSE DE BONCOURT—as a German he called himself Adalbert von Chamisso—was born at the Château of Boncourt in the Champagne on 27th January, 1781. In 1790 his family was forced to flee from the terrors of the French Revolution, in which the ancestral castle was destroyed. They went as exiles first to Liege and subsequently to Aachen, The Hague, Düsseldorf and Southern Germany, finally settling in Berlin in 1796. Henceforth Berlin was to remain Chamisso's home and Germany his spiritual fatherland. He studied at the French Lycée (Französische Gymnasium) in Berlin and became a page to the Queen at the court of Frederick William II. In 1798 he enlisted as an ensign in the Prussian army and in 1801 became a lieutenant.

He hated military life and suffered from poverty and loneliness. After a short visit to France in 1803, he returned to Berlin where, together with friends, among them his compatriot De la Foye, the poet Fouqué and his future biographer J. E. Hitzig, he formed a literary circle which published a magazine (1804-1806) devoted to poetry, to which Chamisso contributed sonnets and other poems. It was his aim to become a German poet but at the same time he

INTRODUCTION

followed his scientific bent and spent his leisure hours earnestly pursuing his studies.

Meanwhile war had broken out again with France, which forced Chamisso to take up arms against his own country, though he spent most of the campaign in Hameln, taking part in the humiliating surrender of that fortress to the French. During those years he was busy on a number of poetic works, among them *Adelbert's Fable*, an allegory of his own life, as well as a fairy-tale, *Fortunatus*, both of which remained unfinished. After the surrender of Hameln, he was allowed to go to France, where he lived unmolested until the peace treaty of Tilsit in 1807, when he returned to Prussia. In 1809 he was honourably discharged from the Prussian army with the rank of captain. A small private income, which he supplemented by teaching, enabled him to resume his studies, though with no clear idea as to his ultimate aims. In 1810, very much against his own inclination, he went to France where his family had arranged a teaching post for him at the Lycée in Napoleonville.

He remained in France for two and a half years, trying in vain to take root there. This is the time in which Chamisso found himself, as he put it, without a shadow—that is to say, without established or recognized background, a born Frenchman, a former Prussian officer, an exile in his own homeland—a sorry figure, a “Schlemihl”. In Paris, he formed a romantic attachment with Madame de Staël, in whose literary circle he met Alexander von Humboldt and August Wilhelm Schlegel, whose lectures on literature he translated into French. He finally reached the decision

INTRODUCTION

that his destiny lay in Germany and in a scientific career. He returned to Berlin in 1812 and took up the study of anatomy and zoology.

The year 1813, which brought the culmination of the struggle between Germany and France, was a time of great inner struggle for Chamisso. Though a German patriot, he was a Frenchman and felt he could not take up arms once more against France. From this conflict of loyalties the book *Peter Schlemihl* sprang, written as a fairy-tale for the children of his friend, Hitzig. The Jewish word "Schlemihl" means an unlucky, ridiculous person. This is how Chamisso saw himself at the time. He has described how the idea first came to him: "On a journey I had lost my hat, my portmanteau, gloves, handkerchief—in short, my entire personal effects. Fouqué asked me if I had not also lost my shadow and we both tried to imagine the misfortune of such a loss." And so the idea of the lost shadow came to stand in Chamisso's mind as a symbol for a man without recognized background and connections. "I am nowhere at home," he once wrote to Madame de Staël, "I am a Frenchman in Germany and a German in France. A Catholic among Protestants, a Protestant among Catholics, a Jacobin among aristocrats, an aristocrat among democrats." He was convinced that he was condemned to remain a man without a home, despised and even persecuted. The world of science and of learning was the only one which had no national barriers and in which he could roam freely.

In 1815 he joined the Russian brig *Rurik*, commanded by Otto von Kotzebue, on a journey of

INTRODUCTION

scientific exploration for the Russian Government. The ship put to sea at Copenhagen in July 1815 and in the three years that followed circumnavigated the globe, returning to Swinemünde in the autumn of 1818. Chamisso has given a complete account of this journey, in the course of which he collected a considerable amount of knowledge of the natural sciences, ethnography and languages and brought back a number of valuable specimens of plant and animal life.

Returned to Germany, he devoted himself to science and poetry. He became custodian of the Botanical Gardens in Berlin. He was given the honorary degree of Doctor of Berlin University and finally was made a member of the Berlin Academy of Science. In 1819 he married Antonia Piaste, a young girl of nineteen, whom he had known when she was still a child. By now he had gained full recognition in the literary and scientific world and could devote his energies to the pursuit of his two main interests. Financially he was helped by a grant from the French Government in compensation for the losses he had sustained during the Revolution.

He had the satisfaction of seeing his work acclaimed and himself regarded as a leading German poet. In 1836 his *Collected Works* appeared in four volumes.

The last years of his life were clouded by illness. His wife died in May 1837 and he only survived her by fifteen months. He died on August 21st, 1838, in Berlin.

L.L.W.

PRINCIPAL DATES OF CHAMISSO'S LIFE

- 1781 27th January. Born at Boncourt, France.
- 1790 Family flees to Germany.
- 1796 Berlin (enters French Lycée and becomes a page).
- 1798 Enlists in Prussian Army.
- 1801 Promoted lieutenant.
- 1803 Visits France.
- 1804–1806 Germany. First poems and publication of literary magazine.
- 1805–1806 War service. Writes *Fortunatus, Adelbert's Fable* (published 1807) and other miscellaneous works.
- 1806–1807 In France.
- 1807 Returns to Berlin.
- 1809 Discharged from army.
- 1810–1812 Lives in France.
- 1812 Returns to Germany.
- 1813 *Peter Schlemihl*.
- 1815–1818 Journey round the world.
- 1819 Marriage to Antonia Piaste. Honorary Doctor of Berlin University.
- 1821 Publication of *Journey round the World* (revised edition 1836).
- 1826–1837 Main period of poetic and scientific output.
- 1831 First *Collected Edition*.
- 1835 Second enlarged and revised edition of *Works*. Became member of Berlin Academy of Science.
- 1836 Final edition of *Works* in four volumes.
- 1838 21st August. Death in Berlin.

CHAPTER I

A SAFE voyage but I cannot pretend a pleasant one and now at last we were in port. As soon as we had been put ashore, I picked up my modest luggage, pushing my way through the milling crowd, made for the humblest house I could see with the sign of an inn outside. I asked for a room. The boots gave me one look and sent me to the garret. I demanded some clean water and asked where Mr. Thomas John lived. Outside the town, I was told, beyond the North Gate; the first country house on the right—a large new building of red and white marble, with many pillars.

It was still early in the day; I opened my bundle, took out my newly-turned black coat, washed and dressed myself in my best clothes. Then, with my letter of introduction in my pocket, I set out on my way to the man who, I hoped, would further my modest ambitions.

Going up the long North Street, I reached the gate whence I could see the pillars of the squire's country seat gleaming through the trees. Here we are at last, I said to myself. I wiped the dust from my boots with my handkerchief, and straightened my cravat. In God's name, I muttered and resolutely pulled the handle of the bell. The door flew open. In the hall I was subjected to close questioning before the porter

would consent to announce me. Thereupon he was good enough to summon me into the park, where Mr. John was strolling with a few of his friends. I recognized him at once by his portly, self-complacent air. He received me well enough—as a rich man receives a poor devil—condescending even to look at me (without, however, turning away from his guests) and took the letter of introduction which I held out to him.

“Well, well,” he said, “fancy a letter from my brother! I have not heard from him for a long time. I trust he is in good health? Over there,” he continued, addressing himself to the assembled company without waiting for my reply and pointing with the letter to a hillock, “over there I am putting up a new building.” He then broke the seal of the letter, without interrupting the conversation, which seemed to turn on the subject of wealth. “In my considered opinion,” he exclaimed, “a man who is worth less than a million is, if you will pardon the expression, a ragamuffin.”

“How very true!” I hastened to concur with deep feeling. This must have pleased him for he smiled.

“Stay here, my young friend; I may have time later to tell you what I think of it,” he said, indicating the letter, which he put into his pocket. He then turned again towards the company and offered his arm to a young lady; most of the other gentlemen followed his example, pairing off with the ladies of their choice, and the whole party made towards the rose-covered hill.

I lingered behind, not wishing to impose my presence—an unnecessary precaution, for no-one took the slightest notice of me. The company seemed in high