

Ivan Vladislavic

Schlemihl/Bendel

Libretto

This is the story of Peter Schlemihl, a young man with ambitions and no prospects, who struck a foolish bargain and ruined his life - only to strike a better bargain and recover its true purpose. He was a European and he lived, in the way that people live in stories, at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

This is the story of Josiah Bendel, a congenital servant with a sense of history, who collected scrap metal in the streets of Johannesburg. He was an old man and an African, and he lived at the close of the twentieth century.

Prologue

I had not gone two hundred paces when I noticed that I had lost the way; I looked around for the path, I found myself in a wild, ancient forest of fir trees, upon which, it seemed, no axe had ever been laid. I went on a few paces; I found myself beneath barren cliffs where only moss and saxifrage grew, with fields of snow and ice lying in between. The air was very cold, I looked around, the forest had disappeared behind me.

Speed made me gigantic. I strode the earth, crushing time beneath my heels, growing taller at every step. In the mud between my treads, in charred fields and broken cities, tiny people waved and called.

I have never mistaken Egypt for a doormat. I am neither fast nor furious. I go through these city streets footfall by footfall and the end of each step carries me to the beginning of the next.

1. The first lie

‘How did the master lose his shadow?’

In Russia, where he went on a trip last winter, his shadow froze to the ground in an extremely cold spell, so that he was unable to get it loose again.

Liar.

The master sold his shadow to the devil in return for riches.

2. Service

I have been in service for as long as I can remember.

One must come to an understanding with Necessity. *I have learned to venerate Necessity as a wise force coursing through the whole great Machinery in which we are mere cogs, driven and driving ...*

I am a collector of noise and iron. I love the sound of rusted chains, creaking bedsteads, empty drums. The batwing bones of umbrellas splintering underfoot. Bars. Any resounding thing that declares my persistence in the world. Above all: bells.

The bargain had been struck. For a thoughtless moment, I revelled in my wealth. I filled my room with

gold and wallowed in it. *I scattered it on the floor and walked over it and made it tinkle ... my poor heart feeding on the glitter and the sound.*

I used to have a pushcart with rubber wheels, and before that a porter's trolley. Once - I hardly remember it now - I may even have owned a wagon and a horse to draw it. Now I have this supermarket trolley, filched from Pick 'n Pay. Tradition: the sound of a dray horse rising up from my iron-tipped soles.

Does this ring a bell? 'The Commander-in-Chief threw little bells on to the beach for them, and they picked them up; and they not only picked up those that were thrown to them, but they approached to take some from the hand of the Commander-in-Chief, at which we marvelled greatly.'

An example from history. The Commander-in-Chief is our old friend Vasco da Gama. Meant to distract me from the task at hand.

Bendel! Bendel!

But nothing makes me raise my head. I have lost faith in the horizon.

3. The imperial harvest

Accepting necessity in the shape of servitude; that is my way. Welcoming providence in the name of power; that was Schlemihl's. He had cast the magic purse into the bottomless abyss and driven Lucifer from his presence. Now he went on alone. Resolved to become a miner. Him!

I was not used to walking. The soles of my shoes - fit for a rich man's carpets rather than a poor man's highway - soon wore out. At a stall in a country market I bought myself a pair of second-hand boots.

I was lost in thought, and hardly noticed where I set my feet; I was thinking about the mine, which I still hoped to reach that evening ...

I took another few steps - the silence of death reigned around me, the ice on which I stood, overhung by a thick, heavy fog, stretched away without end; the sun rested bloodily on the edge of the horizon. The cold was unbearable. I did not know what had happened to me; the numbing frost compelled me to quicken my steps; all I heard was the rush of distant waters: one step, and I was on the icy edge of an ocean. Before me countless herds of seals hurled themselves noisily into the tide. I followed this shore, again I saw naked cliffs, land, birch and fir forests, I ran on for a few minutes straight ahead. It was suffocatingly hot, I looked around, I was standing between cultivated rice fields and mulberry trees. I sat down in their shade, I looked at my watch, not a quarter of an hour had passed since I'd left the marketplace.

I am looking for bells. I remember these: a silver dinner bell with a skinny fist clenched in its belly. A handbell for calling the children to class. A chime from the altar, hung with bells like strident fruit, to humble the faithful before the mysteries. A pair of epaulettes knocked off the shoulders of an alarm clock. I had to muffle their colours in my hands.

I thought I was dreaming, I bit my tongue to wake myself up; but I really was awake. - I closed my eyes to collect my thoughts. - I heard strange nasal syllables being uttered; I looked up: two Chinese, with unmistakably Asiatic features (even if I attached no significance to their clothing) greeted me in their own language; I stood up and took two steps back. I saw them no more, the landscape was altogether different: trees, forests instead of rice fields. I looked at these trees and the herbs blossoming around me: those I recognised were South-East Asian plants; I wanted to approach one of the trees, one step - and

once again everything changed. Now I formed up like a recruit being drilled, and paced slowly, cautiously ahead. Wondrously changeable fields, mountains, steppes, deserts unfurled themselves before my astonished gaze.

Once a wooden crate fell from the back of a truck and broke open, spilling a river of tiny bells into the gutter. Tinny rattlers for the necks of tomcats. I steered my trolley into the chiming surf and raised a clamour, until a messenger came from the Magistrate's Court to silence me. But collecting scrap is not quiet work. When I had scooped the last of the bells into packets and stowed them, I made a loud detour past the holding cells for the benefit of the accused.

A new vocation, a mission was revealed to me. *Shut out from human society because of my early wrongdoing, I had been sent instead to nature, which I had always loved; the earth had been given to me as an abundant garden, study as the direction and force of my life, science as its goal.*

My work is honest, although I live among thieves. Men who take pleasure in carrying off order: the brass numbers from doors and gates, street names, manhole covers and letter-box slots, bus-stop benches and yield signs. Who will be able to find his way through this city when the points of the compass have been harvested and melted down into a chaotic rose?

I would become a naturalist: a collector, a classifier, the servant of a system. This seemed to me less a resolve than a vision, which I would devote myself to realising in practice.

I gathered myself to make a quick survey, without hesitation, taking possession of the fields I wanted to harvest in the future. I stood on the mountain tops of Tibet, and here the sun, which had just risen for me a few hours before, was already sinking into the evening sky; I rambled through Asia from east to west, catching up with the sun in its course, and entered Africa. I looked around curiously ... As I gaped at the old pyramids and temples in Egypt, I happened to spy in the desert, not far from Thebes the Hundred-Gated, the caves where Christian anchorites once lived.

'Suddenly it was clear to me: this is your home.'

Suddenly it was clear to me: this is your home.

One night I found a bell that made no sound. Lost its tongue, I thought. But I could see the clapper bumping silently from side to side in its parched throat. Have I gone deaf? I listened to the rumble of the traffic on the fly-over, the clatter of tin against the wire ribs of my cart, my lungs full of iron filings. I swung the bell next to my ear: nothing but wind. I beat it against a railing, until the bones in my hand ached. Is this voiceless bell a lesson? I tossed it into the fountain outside the Bank of Lisbon and looked around with new eyes at the cars gleaming beneath the street lights.

4. The second lie

'How did the master lose his shadow?'

A clumsy fellow stepped so rudely on my shadow that he tore a big hole in it. I have sent it in for repair - money talks, you know; I should have got it back yesterday already.

Liar.

5. I sat down and wept

Schlemihl went on his way, stepping via the North Pole and Greenland into America. He wandered along mountain ranges, striding from peak to peak, the length and breadth of the Americas, over flaming volcanoes, over snowy mountains, his boots dripping lava and salt. He used the islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali as stepping-stones - and then he could go no further. On the tip of Lamboc, he sat down and wept.

... I finally sat down, with my face turned to the south and east, and I wept, as if at the barred gate of my dungeon, because I had found my limitations so soon.

It was the naturalist in him weeping. Weeping at the realisation that he would never claim the entire world as his estate. The flora and fauna of New Holland and the South Sea islands would elude him. His empire of possession and knowledge would always be incomplete.

... everything that I collected and established was doomed to remain a mere fragment.

Yet the possibility of completion tantalised him. He kept on trying to reach New Holland from the South Pole, stepping boldly from iceberg to iceberg - until he plunged his seven-league boots in the icy water.

Each time I returned to Lamboc and sat down on its tip, and wept again with my face turned to the south and east, as if at the barred gate of my dungeon.

6. History

What good would wings do a man shackled in iron chains? He would despair nevertheless, and more terribly.

The leg-bones of the chicken that Vincent Lunardi ate during his flight over London on 15 September 1784, the first balloon ascent in England (the rest of his meal had been spoilt by the sand he used as ballast); the arm-bones of Stephenson's locomotive, the *Rocket*, which won the inventor £500 in October 1829; the shattered thigh-bone of Mr William Huskisson, whom the *Rocket* knocked down and killed on 15 September 1830, during the official opening of the railway between Liverpool and Manchester; the view from the balloon in which Henry Mayhew floated over London on 13 September 1852.

Bendel! Bendel!

The taxonomy of relics from the history of velocity. It engrossed me so, that I hardly heard the sirens.

7. Equipment

The seven-league boots proved to be dangerous equipment: it was no easy task shortening his stride when he wished to take a closer look at some nearby item. The boots were always carrying him beyond his object, exaggerating the gestures of scrutiny and acquisition. In due course he acquired 'brakes' - several pairs of bedroom slippers which he could slip on over the boots when he needed to slow down, or kick off when he needed to make a rapid escape from lions, humans or hyenas. Predators, fellow men, scavengers.

In addition, I needed a sextant, a few scientific instruments and books. In order to acquire all these, I

made several anxious trips to London and Paris, where I was shadowed by a favourable fog ... When the rest of my magic gold had been exhausted, I brought easy-to-find African ivory along as payment ... Soon I was equipped with everything, and I immediately began my new way of life as an independent scholar.

He took possession of the fields he would be harvesting.

I roamed the earth, now measuring its altitudes, now the temperatures of its springs and of the air, now observing animals, now examining plants; I hurried from the Equator to the Pole, from one world to another, comparing experiences. The eggs of the African ostrich or northern seabirds as well as fruits, especially those of the tropical palm and bananas, served as my common fare.

8. Stories

As I passed along Apollonia Street one day, a metallic glint in a pile of litter caught my eye. It proved to be a typewriter key. A stalk as delicate as a stamen, with a button at one end marked B and a block of type at the other. B for Bendel. The ink left a red smear on my fingertip. I looked for a scrap of paper to wrap the key in and instead found another. F for Faith. I swept the papers aside with my hand and uncovered a scattering of keys like the rib-bones of an extinct bird. I retrieved them all and laid them in the bottom of the trolley.

9. Fever

One day in the frozen north, Schlemihl's bedroom-slipper 'brakes' malfunctioned and he tumbled into the sea.

The cold seized me, I barely managed to escape from this danger with my life; as soon as I reached land, I ran as quickly as I could to the Libyan desert to dry myself off in the sun. But exposed as I was, the sun burned my head so fiercely that I reeled back to the north again very ill. I sought through vigorous movement to get some relief, and ran with quick and shaky steps from west to east and from east to west. I found myself now in day and now in night, now in summer and now in the chill of winter.

Until he collapsed.

10. The third lie

'How did the master lose his shadow?'

During a long and terrible illness I lost my hair, my nails, my shadow. See, Father, at my age, the hair that grew back is completely white, the nails very short, and the shadow - it doesn't want to grow again.

Liar.

11. Home

I go on. I think I know how I got here, step by step. The end of every line chimes like a bell. The carriage retreats and takes me back to the beginning. I must begin again.

O my dear old friend, I hope you have not forgotten what love is!

The machine collected itself as I walked. A faint jingling, ribs rattling against each other, became a rhythmic patter. The teeth of the machine chattering. A word fell out of the trolley and flickered away like a shadow. Another drifted out from between the bars and curled upwards on the breeze. I caught at it but it dissolved between my fingers. A sentence plummeted and sank into the tar. Scraps of stories dispersed on the breeze. Love stories too full of tears to lay on paper. The machinery, calling after home by its many names.