

MARCEL SCHWOB

**THE BLUE COUNTRY
THE SALT SMUGGLERS**

TRANSLATED BY KIT SCHLUTER

THE BLUE COUNTRY

To Oscar Wilde

In a country town I wouldn't be able to find anymore, the sloping streets are old and the houses decked with slate. Rain runs along the sculpted pilotis, and its droplets all fall in the selfsame place, with the selfsame sound. The round little windows have sunken into the walls, as if to keep from being struck. There is nothing brave in these streets, save for the ivy above the doors and the moss atop of the walls: the ivy's dark and shiny leaves bare their teeth, and the moss dares to consume all the large stones that sit outside its yellow velvet—but the people here are as fleeting as the shadow of rising smoke.

There are still reddish lanterns swinging from the lintels, thin candles in the tin chandeliers and boxes of sulfur matches, little windowpanes covered in shadow and dust behind which strange little flasks slumber, whose liquors were once green and blue. Ruffled cornets tremble in the windows, and sometimes one glimpses the pale faces of children and frail fingers shaking tarnished puppets, a wooden goose, or a half-colored ball.

There, one winter night, under a black awning, a cold little hand slipped into mine, and a childish voice whispered in my ear, "Come along!" We walked up a staircase with warped steps; it curled in a spiral and had a rope for a banister; the windows were yellow with moonlight, and a solitary door swung open and shut, blown by in the wind. The cold little hand held me by the wrist.

When we went into the room, enclosed by four disjointed boards and a string lock-
et, a guttering candle was lit and stuck into a bottle. Beside me, holding my hand, was a little girl of thirteen years; her fine golden hair fell over her shoulders and her black eyes gleamed with excitement. But she was slender and slight, and her skin was of a color given by hunger.

"My name's Maïe," she said, and, holding my finger: "Not that you were scared, you terrible monster, when I took your hand . . ."

Then, she took me around the room—"Hello, my pretty mirror," she said. "You're an itsy bit broken, but that's okay. Here's a very nice friend of mine I want to you to meet.—Hello, my nasty table with only three legs; you're nasty, but I love you anyway.—Hello, my pitcher that doesn't have a face anymore; that won't stop me from kissing you to drink up your water.—Hello, my home, I greet you in solidarity: today I have company."

I had put, I believe, a bit of money on the poor table. Maïe jumped up to my neck. "If you want," she said, "I'll go out and get us a big loaf of bread, a six pound loaf—Goodbye, my home; be good while I'm gone; there's an old picture album in the corner."

She came gravely back up the stairs, her chin on the loaf powdered with flour, her two arms underneath, and her hands clutching her puffy apron. She rolled everything over the floor. "You see," she said, "I bought some chestnuts; that way I'll never get in trouble; they're filling, they're healthy, and I've got enough for my winter." She laid them out flat, one by one, in the drawer of the table, laughed at them before closing it, and sat down on the bed. Then she picked up the big loaf of bread and started to nibble at its crust; as she ate, her face sank deeper into the hunk of bread, and she watched me all the while to make sure I wasn't laughing at her.

When she had finished eating, she sighed. "I was hungry," she said. "And Michel, too, probably. Where is he now, that rascal?—Michel is a very unhappy little boy, you know, doesn't have a mom or dad anymore; he's scary looking; he's a hunchback; he helps me make my fire and goes to fetch me my water; that way he gets to eat with me, and I give him a buck or two when I have it."

We heard clogs clapping, and the locket's string shook.—"There he is," Maïe said. I saw a pale runt walk in, his hands and nose black with charcoal, his short trousers open to the wind: he stuck his tongue out at me and scowled with his mouth.—"All right, Michel, calm down," said Maïe. "You're better off listening to this mister who's talking to you. Go along now." Michel came back up with the bottle of sweet wine I had asked for.

The little cast iron pan had been filled and lit. There was a bit of demolition wood around, still smudged with cement. The chestnuts roasted on the lid: Maïe had bitten them, to let in a bit of air. Sometimes they would pop, and Maïe chastised them: "Nasty chestnuts, could you please not jump around?" All the while, she hemmed the brushed cotton lining of a blouse. The needle would pass through with a gentle grating. The glow of the pan fell upon her nimble hands, and made the fabric shine. Michel, squatting, closed his eyes to the heat.

"I'm sewing, I'm sewing," Maïe said. "I'll get five bucks. That's good money, isn't it? Give me a splash of that sweet wine, you monster. You drink the dregs: I don't want to get married or hanged."

In her childish language, she told me the story of her life. She knew neither good nor evil. She had wandered the countryside, with horrible boys, and played in the commedia. At nine years old, she was princess deep in a barnyard, her bare feet in the straw, and a golden paper crown upon her head. She still remembered some of the monologues from her parts, and recited a few to me. "Oh! There was this beautiful piece," she said. "It was called *The Blue Country*, I think. We couldn't see it was blue, but we imagined it, you see. The mountains were blue, the trees were blue, the grass and the animals were blue. And I said, 'My prince, this is the palace of my father, the king; it's made of strong steel, and the

red iron door is guarded by a three-headed dragon. If you want to win my hand . . . ‘ Boo!— just a jumping chestnut. Michel, why don’t you peel some chestnuts instead of sleeping? Is it true that there’s a Blue Country? I’m sure I’d be there; but they put all the guys I used to play with in jail. People pretended like they were robbing houses. One day a guard came, and he said to them, he said . . . oh, it’s nothing, I don’t remember—but I never saw them again. And since then I’ve lived in the city; but it’s sad. It’s always raining. You see nothing but slate and little black shops.”

And so she twittered on; then she flew into a rage: “Michel, I told you, no dirtying up my room with your fruit peels. Pick them up. Oh, you derelict! Hello!” She took off one of her ankle boots and threw it at his head. Her face was red, and her eyes were sparkling.

“You can’t imagine how mean he is. He puts me through so much!”

Nevertheless, I would have to leave little Maïe; but I promised to return. I saw her every day, and she sewed endlessly before her wood stove. Then she pieced together bizarre suits out of colorful rags. Her skin came back to life; at last, Maïe was eating. But in so far as her misery went away, she grew sadder. She would watch the rain as it fell. “You monster, you nasty monster,” she would say, her eyes empty, her lips slack. Once, just barely cracking the door open, I saw her standing before her broken mirror, with her golden hair over her hardly formed breasts and a paper crown cut with scissors upon her head. When she heard me, she hid it away. “Michel is mean,” she said: “he’d make a good dragon.”

The winter was nearing its end. The sky was still dark, but some rays of sunlight caused the shingles’ edges to gleam. The rain fell less heavily.

One night, I found the room empty. There was no longer a table, no chair, no pan, no pitcher. Looking through the window, I could have sworn I saw hunched shoulders disappearing at the far end of the courtyard. And, by the light of the cellar candles which helped me back up the stairs, I saw a sign tacked to the wall, inscribed with these words in big letters:

GOODBYE, MY HOME. MAÏE AND MICHEL WENT OFF TO THE BLUE COUNTRY.

THE SALT SMUGGLERS

To Charles Maurras

I cannot say how I came to row in the king's galleys, for I am too ashamed. But take any of the five sorts of man who inscribe the waters with their fifteen-foot plumes—Turks, Protestants, salt smugglers, deserters, and thieves—and choose the very worst among them: I have perhaps been that. I have known the galleys of Marseille; the Sun King keeps twenty-four of them, and the convicts are content upon them. At sea there is great heat, and sweat, and vermin, and the chains are heavy for the dragging, and the scent of the bilge is pestilent; but in the ports, for a mere two liards slipped to the Algousin and Turk, and five to the Pertuisenier to guide them, they can go into the city, see their wives, and set up shop about the harbor. On the ocean are six galleys, and I had the misfortune of passing through them. There we endured the mist and rain and great underswells which caused our oars to jump, by fives, from our hands, and the dashes of seaspray which drenched our hardtack; and the cold made us hungry; we had only our evening meal at ten, the "jafle"—a bit of hot water with oil and beans—and the "pichrone" of diluted wine which they poured us on the galley did not keep us warm.

The galley's deck is flat; spanning its length is a great bench, straddled by the three "comites," who beat us with a cane; each time it falls, it strikes three men. We stow the ammunition and provisions under the deck in six rooms, which we call the Gavon, the Scandelat, the Campaign, the Paillot, the Tavern, and the Fore-room. Then there is another hold, dark and narrow, accessible only by a scuttle two-foot square; at both ends a sort of scaffold, called a "taular"; a three-foot space between these taulars and the ceiling; a basin in the middle. This is the galley's hospital. The sick lie chained to the taulars; and, when they get feverish, they pound the deck from below with their heads and all four limbs; one has to crawl through the dying men and keep his face turned away from these basins.

Our mates upon the green ocean are salt smugglers; for salt is expensive on the Breton shores, the best of it being worth nearly two écus; in Burgundy, however, it can be purchased at a better rate. Those who bring their provisions to Brittany from the other provinces are thus traitors under the gabelle. The king has them apprehended, branded, and sent among our ranks. There are no deserters; those are easy to recognize, by their faces, where great open wounds never dry in the sun; they slit own their noses to avoid service, and vermin gnaw away the skin between their eyes. But we have a number of *compagnons de la matte*, maritime crooks, who never despair; they bear the mark of the *tape*, a pretty fleur-de-lis, on their foreheads or shoulders, and oftentimes a red necklace from the rope of a gibbet.

The salt smugglers had better morale than we, being accustomed to gray skies, to the green and yellow seas; but never did they laugh, for they were always rebellious. Nor did those who had been with us in Marseille ever venture into the cities alongside the Per-tuiseniers, to visit the white houses by the ports where women await the galley slaves: for throughout their servitude, it was said, they would remain faithful to the fierce women who had once lived with them among the salt mills.

The night of Mardi Gras, 1704, our galley *The Superb* was abeam the Pays Gallo coasts. Our Captain, M. d'Antigny, along with his officers, had invited our three "comites" into the ship, and we were at ease about the deck, happy for the chance to scratch beneath our red coats and shirts of thick fabric, to take off our caps and rub our shaved heads against the railings. Ordinarily, at night, we had to endure those itches without budging; any jangling of the chains would waken the officers, and the canes would rain down upon our poor mates.

Four salt smugglers lay about the chamber with the taulars, cruelly bound, their bodies bloody; that day, they had received the knotted rope, splayed naked over our bronze cannon, the Coursier; and we heard them wailing below the deck.

I was about to nod off when the Steersman, to whom I was chained, tapped me on the shoulder. Each of us was fettered to a Turk; we called them Steersmen for the way they, being more expert than us, worked tip of the oar like master oarsmen, purchased expressly for the galleys by the king. "Look," said the steersman; "there are fireships at sea."

The mist was light: even so, we couldn't see the coasts. Nothing but a long line of luminous foam and, in certain places, white fires perhaps, which appeared to sparkle, yellow and green.

On the Mediterranean, war had acquainted me with fire ships. The Duke of Savoy's brigantines, which had passed before us, setting sail from Villa Franca, Saint-Hospitio, or Oneglia, would release them into the current at night, and we would sink them with the thirty-six pound cannonballs of the Coursier.

But here, on this ocean, I knew nothing anymore. The fire ships I had seen were red and mobile; whereas the fires we now beheld were still, giving off a white light and sudden puffs of yellow smoke. The sea rolled calmly; the helmsman kept vigil beside the lantern at the bow, and, from the middle of the tent which covered the deck between the two masts, a single oil lamp hung, swinging. Everything was so peaceful that those could not have been distress fires.

I rolled over to the Steersman, and we hoisted our chain off the ground, each with a single hand. Cupping our ears, it sounded as if rowboats were tossing against the keel. We crawled forward to the starboard edge, which looked onto land, and holding our heads

just above the railing, we spied the caïque, the long dinghy, drawing slowly away from the galley; full of crouching men, dressed in white shirts with red masks. One of them pushed the caïque off from the hull, with a long oar. "Alas!" I thought, "the salt smugglers are escaping, on this unguarded night!" But the Steersman pulled me to the larboard. We walked slowly between the sleeping bodies, clutching the chain in our fingers. The rowboat was to the larboard.

An instant later and we were inside it. We made not a jingle, not a jangle. The Steersman was from a silent country. And, rounding the stern, avoiding the lantern light, we proceeded in the caïque's wake, which gently rocked our boat.

We trembled in the shade, for fear of an errant oar stroke or a roll call. But we saw the luminous shoreline more clearly, and the black strand where breakers dashed into foam. We also saw the fires burning white, which was not in fact their own color, but that of the great livid mounds before which they burned. And we could hear the singular crackling of the flames, as they tossed their yellow sparks.

The red masks of the men in the caïque were made from their jackets, which they had wrapped around their heads, and in which they had torn holes. At a cable length from the coast, we saw that these pale mounds were salt mills, and stood, receding, at a distance of about ten toises from one another; before each one there burned a fire, and beside each fire, we made out women throwing in the king's salt.

The caïque made land, as we were still fighting the undertow. The salt smugglers masked in red leapt onto the strand, and, each one, no doubt recognizing his faithful girl, took hold of her suddenly; in a second, they had disappeared into the night.

But we, on seeing this unknown and desolate coast, these pale mounds of salt and these crackling fires, we were seized by terror; and the Steersman cried, "Allah!" as he threw himself back into the bottom of the dinghy, not wanting to touch the land.

While we were hesitating, a flame shot off, with a detonation: the Coursier was firing an alert. A long, chanted moan broke out over the galley; our mates wept the *fol-de-rol*, as if to the second call when the senior officers visit us.

Disoriented, we took up our oars again, and returned to sea.

The rowboat sloshed over the water; its impact against the hull made us stagger; we slipped back into the galley through an open porthole. One heard the noise of all the galley slaves' feet upon the deck; we blended into the company of our mates, with heads held low. Through the scuttle of the hold with the taulars, the four pale faces of the enchained and bloody salt smugglers appeared, twisted in despair; for their friends had forgotten them; and on the Bancasse, the high bench whence the chaplain says mass, and whence he raises for us the Host, the staggering captain lifted the helmsman's lantern, while he made us march past two by two, to know the deserters, our mates of the chain.