

ACCOUNT

OF A MOST

Surprising Savage Girl,

Who was caught wild in the Woods of Champagne, a Province in FRANCE, Containing a true and faithful Narrative of many curious and interesting particulars respecting this wonderful Phenomenon.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH



EDINBURGH:

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Of a Surprizing Savage Girl.

ONE evening, in the month of September, 1761, a girl nine or ten years old, being pressed, as it would seem, by thirst, entered about the twilight into Songi, a village four or five leagues south of Chalons in Champagne a province in France. She had nothing on her feet, her body was covered with rags and skins, her hair with a gourd leaf, and her face and hands were as black as a negro's. She was armed with a short baton, thicker at one end than the other very like a club. Those who first observed her, took to their heels, crying out, There is the devil. Bad indeed her dress and colour might well suggest this idea to the country people, and happiest were they who could soonest secure their doors and windows; but one of them, thinking that the devil was afraid of dogs, set loose upon her a bull dog with an iron collar. The little savage seeing him advance in a fury, kept her ground without flinching, and grasped her little club with both hands, stretched herself to one side, in order to give greater scope to the blow. Perceiving

the dog within her reach, she discharged such a terrible blow on his head as laid him dead at her feet. Elated with her victory, she jumped several times over the dead carcase of the dog. Then she tried to open a door, which not being able to effect, she ran back into the country towards a river, and mounting a tree, fell fast asleep.

A French nobleman happened to be then at his country house of Songi, where, having heard various accounts of the little savage that had appeared on his grounds, he gave orders to catch her; and particularly to the shepherd, who had discovered her first in a vineyard..

One of the country people, by a very simple thought, but which was attributed to his great knowledge of the manners and customs of savages, conjectured that she was thirsty, and advised to place a pitcher full of water at the foot of the tree on which she was sitting, she, after looking sharply around, to see whether any body observed her, came down and went to drink at the pitcher, plunged her chin into the water; but something having startled her, she regained the top of the tree before they had time to apprehend her. This first stratagem

having failed, the same person again advised to place a woman and some children near the tree, because savages commonly are not so shy of them as of men; and he had them above all, shew her a friendly air and a smiling countenance; His directions were complied with; A woman with a child in her arms, came walking near the tree, carrying different sorts of roots and two fishes in her hands, which she held out to the savage, who desirous to have them, descended a branch or two but went back again. The woman still continued her invitation with an affable pleasant countenance, accompanied with all possible signs of friendship such as laying her hand upon her breast, as if to assure her that she loved her, and would do her no harm; the savage was at last emboldened to come down the tree, and receive the roots and fishes; but the woman enticing her from the tree, by retiring insensibly, gave time to the men who were lying in wait for her, to advance and seize her. She never mentioned any thing of the grief and anxiety she felt on being taken, nor of the efforts she made, to escape; but we may easily imagine both. The shepherd, and the rest who had caught and

brought her to the castle, carried her first into the kitchen, till M. d'Epinoÿ should be informed of her arrival. The first thing there that appeared to draw her attention, was some fowls which the cook was dressing; at these she flew with much amazing agility, that she astonish'd cooke beheld one in her teeth before he'd imagined she had reach'd it. M. d'Epinoÿ arriv'd in the mean time, and seeing what she was eating, caus'd to give her an unskinn'd rabbit; she instantly stripp'd off the skin, and devour'd it. His Highness who consider'd her then, were of opinion that she was about nine years of age. She seem'd black, as I have already said; but it appear'd, after washing her several times, that she was naturally white, as she still continues. They observ'd likewise, that her fingers, and in particular her thumbs, were very large: in proportion to the rest of her hands, which was otherwise neat enough. And to this day, her thumbs retain somewhat of that largeness. By her account, these largest long thumbs were very useful to her during her wild life: in the woods; for when she had a mind to go from one tree to another, if the branches of the two trees were but a small distance

stance, and though of no greater thickness than her finger, she would place her thumbs on a branch of the tree in which she happened to be, and by their means spring to the other, just like a squirrel. From this we may judge of the strength of those thumbs of hers, which were able in this manner to sustain the whole weight of her body in springing. She was committed to the care of the shepherd, who dwelt near the castle, and recommended by M. d'Eginoy to his utmost care, who promised to reward him handsomely for his pains. We may well conceive, that it would require a considerable deal of time, and some hard usage to wean her from her former habits, and to temper her fierce and savage disposition; and there is reason to believe that she was very closely confined in this house, for she found means to make holes in the walls, and in the tiles of the roof, upon which she would run with as much unconcern as upon the ground, never suffering herself to be retaken without a great deal of trouble, and passing softly through small holes that they could scarcely believe their eyes; after they had seen her do it. It was a bust that she escaped once, among several o-to

ther times, out of this house, in a most severe storm of frost and snow; on which occasion, after making good her escape she betook herself for shelter to a tree, — The confusion, which the family was thrown into was great. who, after searching the house to no purpose, resolved at last to look for her without, where they found her perched on the top of a high tree; from whence however they were lucky enough to prevail on her to come down.

I myself have been an eye-witness to some instances of her ease and swiftness, than which nothing could be more surprising; and yet what I saw, was but the remains of her former agility, which long sickness, and the want of practice for many years had greatly impaired.

Without having seen it, it is hardly possible to imagine her singular and agile manner of running; even for several years after she was caught, she could overtake the game in the chace

Mademoiselle le Blanc, (the name by which she is now called,) remembers perfectly well her having passed a river two or three days before she was taken; and we shall see by and by, that this is one of the most certain facts of her his-

tery. She was then accompanied by another black girl, a little older nor her, but whether that was her natural colour, or whether she was only painted like *le Blanc*, is uncertain. They were swimming across a river, and diving to catch fishes, when they were observed by a gentleman of that neighbourhood, who, seeing nothing but their heads, and then appeared above the water, mistook them, as he says himself, for two water-cocks, and fired at them from a good distance. Luckily, however, he missed them, but the report made them dive and retire farther off. The little *le Blanc*, on her part had a fish in each hand, and an eel in her teeth. After having gutted and washed them, they ate or rather devoured them. When their repast was finished, they directed their course into the country, having left the river at their back. Soon after, *le Blanc*, perceived a chaplet on the grounds which, no doubt had been drop'd by some person. Being apprehensive lest her companion should deprive her of this little treasure, she stretched out her hand to take it up, upon which the other, with her baton, struck her, so severe a stroke on the head, that she lost the use of it.

for some time she had, however, of much strength left, as with the weapon in her hand, to return the blow on the forehead of her antagonist, with such force as to knock her to the ground, screaming frightfully, The chaplet was the reward of her victory, of which she made herself a bracelet, Touched, in the mean time, with compassion for her companion, whose wound bled very much; she ran in search of frogs, and finding one, stripped off its skin with her nails, and covered the wound After this they separated; she that was wounded taking the road towards the river, and the victorious *le Blanc* towards Songi.

There is much uncertainty as to what happened to these two children, previous to their arriving in Champagne: *le Blanc's* memory, on that head, being very indistinct and confused. I shall relate, however, every particular I have been able to learn from her, from which I shall endeavour to form some probable conjectures about her native country, and the adventures that may have brought her into Champagne. But to return to her history.

The squeaking cries she uttered thro' her throat were very frightful. The most

terrible of all were uttered by her on the approach of any unknown person, with an intention to take hold of her, at which she discovered a horror that appeared altogether extraordinary. Of this she once gave a strong instance; A man who had heard of her abhorrence of being touched resolved nevertheless to embrace her in spite of the danger that he ran in going too near her. She had in her hand at the time, a piece of raw beef which she was devouring with great satisfaction. The instant she saw the man near her arm, she gave him such a violent stroke on the face, both with her hand, and the piece of flesh she held in it, that he was so stunned and blinded, as to be scarce able to keep his feet. The savage at the same time, believing the strangers around to be so many enemies, who intended to murder her, or dreading, perhaps, punishment for what she had done, sprung out of their hands towards a window, through which she had a view of trees and a river, intending to jump from it, and so make her escape, which she certainly would have done, if they had not again caught hold of her.

She appeared particularly fond of fish, either from her natural taste, or from her acquiring by constant practice, from her childhood, the faculty of catching them, in the water with more ease than she could the wild game by speed of foot — She retained this inclination for catching fish in the water two years after her capture, One day happening to be brought to the castle of Songi, she no sooner perceived a door open which led to a large pond, when she immediately ran and threw herself into it, drest as she was, swam round all the sides of it. and landed on a small Island, went in search of frogs, which she ate at leisure, This circumstance puts me in mind of a comical adventure which *M. le Blanc* told me herself.

When any company visited *M. d'Epignoy* at Songi. he used to send for the girl, who was become more tame, and began to discover much good humour, and a softness and humanity of disposition, which the savage life she had been obliged to follow for self-preservation, had not been able to efface. One day, as she was present at a great entertainment in the castle, observing none of the delicacies she esteemed every thing

being cooked, she ran out like lightning, and traversing all the ditches and ponds, returned with her apron full of frogs, which she spread very liberally on the plates of all the guests, and was quite overjoyed at having found such good cheer. We may easily figure to ourselves the confusion and bustle this occasioned among the guests, every one endeavouring to avoid or throw away the frogs that were hopping all about. The little savage quite surpris'd at the small value they seem'd to set on her delicate fare, carefully gathered them up, and threw them back again on the plates and table. The same thing has happened several times in different companies.

It was with the utmost difficulty that they put her off eating raw flesh, and by degrees reconcil'd her to cooked victuals. The first trials she made to accustom herself to victuals dress'd with salt, and to drink wine, cost her her teeth, which, together with her nails, were preserv'd as a curiosity. She recover'd indeed, a new set of teeth just like ours, but hurt her health, which continues to be extremely delicate. There was but little probability of preserving her alive;

her best state of health being a sickly languor, which seemed to be carrying her to the grave. A physician was sent for to see her, who, being at a loss what to prescribe, hinted, that it was necessary to indulge her now and then with a bit of raw flesh. Accordingly they gave her some, but she could, by that time, only chew it, and suck the blood out of it, which relieved her. It was with great trouble that she began to recover, and accustom herself to cooked victuals. She was then placed in a convent, at Chalons, where she began to improve, and be pretty expert in several female works, and her education. She had lived some years in that convent, and had applied for permission to assume the veil; but conceiving a disgust at the house, and being ashamed to live with people who had seen her in her wild estate immediately after she was caught, and when uncivilized, she obtained leave to remove to a convent at St. Manchole. She did not remain long here, the Duke of Orleans taking her under his protection, brought her to Paris, placed her in the convent of the Nouvelles Catholiques, in the street of St. Anne, and went thither himself to see

and converse with her, that he might know what progress she had made in her education. Being afterwards removed to another convent, still under the protection of that prince, she fell from a window, and received a violent stroke on the head, which occasioned a long disorder that attacked her. Her life was despair'd of, but by the kind assistance of her noble patron, she was considerably relieved. it is impossible to express the melancholy reflections of this unhappy girl, on being by the death of the prince, left weak and languishing without either relation or friend to take care of her among these strangers; at the same time, in case of her recovering she foresaw what neglect, and how many mortifications she must undergo, from persons who had no prospect of being repaid their advances on her account.

It was in these disagreeable circumstances that I saw her for the first time in November 1772. They hardly were mended when *le Blanc* had recovered as much strength as to be able to come to herself to tell me, that the Duke the of Orleans, the inheritor of his father's virtues, had undertaken to pay the nine months board that had fallen due, for

her since her father's death, and that she had besides some reason to hope to be put on that prince's list, for a yearly pension of 200 livres for life; adding, at the same time, that until, this last point should be settled, which could not happen till the month of January following she had accepted of a small apartment, which a person had offered her. But how, says I, do you propose to subsist in this apartment for two months and perhaps more in your sickly condition. For what purpose, (answered she, with a firmness and confidence that surpris'd me.) hath God brought me from among wild beasts, and made me a Christian? not surely afterwards to abandon and suffer me to perish for hunger; that is impossible: I know no other father but him, his providence will therefore support me. —

This ingenious reply, compensates for the pains I have taken to compose this relation, which I shall conclude with some of her own observations with regard to the first part of her life.

She has no remembrance of her parents, or any other person, and scarcely the country itself, except that they had no houses, but holes in the ground,

that she frequently mounted trees to avoid wild beasts, and that her countries were covered with snow: that when they were carried away by the ship, on account of some attempts they made to escape, the two little savages were confined in the hold of the ship; but this precaution had like to have proved fatal both to them and the ship's company. For, here they formed a scheme of scratching a hole in the ship with their nails, by which they might make their escape into their favourite element, the water. The crew, however, luckily discovered their operations, in time to prevent them, and escape shipwreck. This attempt made them chain the two little savages, so as to put it out of their power to attempt the like again.

It appears that after the escape of these two children from the shipwreck, being then incapable of any other views than those of liberty and self-preservation, they pursued no other rout than chance and necessity presented. At night according to *de Blanc*, they saw more distinctly than in the day; (which, however, must not be understood literally, though her eyes do still retain somewhat of that faculty) they travelled about in

search of food. The small game which they caught, and the roots of trees, were their provisions. The trees were likewise their beds or rather their cradles for they slept soundly in them, either sitting or riding in some branch, suffering themselves to be rocked by the winds, and exposed to the inclemency of the weather, without any other precaution, than securing themselves with one hand, and using the other by way of pillow.

The largest rivers did not stop their journey, by day or night, for they always crossed them without any dread. Sometimes they entered for the sake of drinking, which they performed by dipping in their chin up to the mouth, and sucking the water like horses. But they most frequently entered the rivers to catch the fish they saw at the bottom, which they brought on shore, to open their skin, and eat them.

Having hinted to *Madameyella* the *Blanc* in the difficulty I had to believe it possible for her to make her way out of a deep river, in the way she mentioned, without the assistance of her hands and breath, she assured me, that without such assistance she always mounted to the surface, a very little breath being

sufficient for that purpose, having given an example only four years ago. Of this she shewed me the way, standing upright, with both arms held straight up, as if holding something above the water, having the end of her handkerchief between her teeth, like a fish breathing at the same time softly, but without stopping with each corner of her mouth alternately, as a smoker, breathes with one side of his mouth, while he holds his pipe in the other. In this way, by *le Blanc's* account; she and her companion passed the Marne on their way to Songi where she was taken, as above-mentioned.

In the year 1763, she was in a poor state of health, having lost all her extraordinary bodily faculties, and having nothing of the savage, but a certain wildness in her look, and a great appetite.

The foregoing Narrative was drawn up under the immediate inspection of M. de la Condemine, a French gentleman, whose curiosity and accuracy, in matters of this sort is universally known, and who had a particular acquaintance with *Mademoiselle le Blanc*. It bears the plainest marks of truth and authority; but

any doubts remained; the facts could be attested by living witnesses. The woman herself was alive in the year 1765 when the translator and a Scots gentleman, then at Paris, had several conversations with her. To these two gentlemen he related the following particulars:—

Remembered that the country she came from was very cold, covered with snow a great part of the year: That the children there are accustomed to the water from the moment of their birth and learn to swim as soon as to walk: That they are taught very early to climb trees; and a child of a year old there, is able to climb a tree: That the people live in little huts above the water, like beavers, and subsist chiefly by fishing. She herself was so much used to water, that when she came to France she could not live without it, and was inclined to plunge into it over head and ears, and to continue in it swimming about and diving like an otter, or any other amphibious animal.

She supposes she was only about seven or eight years of age when she was carried away from her own country: yet at that time, she had learned to swim, to fish, to shoot with the bow and arrow,

to climb and to leap from one tree to another like a squirrel. She was taken up at sea, where she was, with other children for in a little round canoe, which was covered with a skin that drew about her middle like a parasol, and prevented the water from getting in. She says it is the manner in her country to put the children early out to sea in such canoes in order to accustom them to beat the sea, which breaks over them, and though it may overturn the canoe, does not sink it. --- When she was taken up she was put aboard a great ship, carried to a warm country, and sold as a slave to the person who sold her having first painted her black with a view to make her pass for a slave. She says she never saw any more of her country.

She says further of the country from whence she was carried away, that the people there had no clothing but skins, and make no use of fire at all. So that when she came to France, she could not bear the fire and hardly even the close air of a room, or the breath of persons who were near her. There were, she says, another sort of men in this country, who were bigger and stronger than her people, and all covered with hair, and those people were at war with her

people; and used to eat them when they could catch them. *Le Blanc* stood blind. In the hot country to which she was first carried, she says, she was re-embarked, and performed a very long voyage, during which, the master, to whom she had been sold, wanted to make her work, particularly at a sort of needle work; he beat her, but her mistress, who she thinks spoke French, was very kind to her.—That the ship having been wrecked the crew took to the boat; but she, an negro girl that was on board, were left to shift for themselves. The negro girl, she says, could not swim so well as she, but she kept herself above water by taking hold of *le Blanc's* foot, and by this way they both got on shore. They then traversed a great tract of country, commonly travelling all night, and sleeping in the day time on the tops of trees. They subsisted upon the roots which she dug out of the ground with her fingers, and particularly her thumb, which by that, and by the use she made of it in climbing, and leaping from one tree to another, is much larger than the thumbs of other people. They also caught as much game as they could, which they eat raw, with the warm blood

in it, in the same manner as a hawk or wild beast does; and she remembers particularly, that they killed a fox, of which they only sucked the blood, finding the flesh very disagreeable.

She had when she was caught at Song the bludgeon above mentioned, which she wore in a pouch by her side; and besides, she had a longer stick, with three pieces of iron at the end of it, one in the middle, sharp and pointed, and the other two upon the sides hooked; and the use she made of it, was to stab a wild beast that attacked her, with the sharp point; and with the hooks she assisted herself in climbing trees, by catching hold of the branches; and she says it was particularly useful to her in defending her against the bears, when they attempted to follow her up the trees. This weapon she says she brought with her from the hot country, but the other from her own. From the above particulars, which I learnt from her own mouth, I think I am able to fix with some certainty upon the country of which she is a native. She has been supposed to be of the Esquimaux nation; but there is a sufficient proof to refuse this notion, for she is of a fair complexion, a smooth skin, an

features as soft as those of an European: Whereas the people of the Esquimaux nations, are, by the accounts of all travellers; the ugliest men, of the hardest and most disagreeable feature, and all covered with hair; She is certainly not mistaken in the situation of the country which she gives, for it is doubtless a very cold country; and the people whom she describes as living in the neighbourhood of her nation, can be no other than the Esquimaux: and when we add to this, what travellers tell us of a certain race of people, who are fair, of smooth skins and soft features, living in the country of Labrador, upon the east side of Hudson's bay, in the neighbourhood of the Esquimaux; we can hardly doubt but that *Mademoiselle le Blanc*, is one of that race of people and that her native country is the coast of Hudson's bay, considerably to the northward of Nova Scotia, the principal settlement of the British in North America.

EXTRACT from the Baptism Register of the Parish Church of St Suplice, of the town of Chalons in Champagne.

THE 19th day of June, in the year 1762, was baptized by me, after sub-

scribing Priest, Canon-Rugalar, Prior,
 Curate of St. Sulpice of Chalons, in
 Champagne, Marie Angélique Memmie,
 aged about eleven years, whose parents
 are unknown, even to the girl herself,
 who has been either born in, or trans-
 planted when very young to some island
 in America, from whence by the dispo-
 sition of a merciful providence, having
 landed in France, and being still con-
 ducted by the same goodness of God, in
 this diocese, has been, at last, placed un-
 der the patronage of our illustrious bishop,
 in the Hospital General of St. Maur, in-
 to which she entered the 30th of October
 last; her god father being M. Memmie,
 le Moine, procurator of the said hospital;
 and her god mother, Damaïsefelle Marie-
 Nicola d'Halle, governess of the same
 hospital of St. Maur, who have attested
 the day and year as above. (So signed
 Memmie le Moine, — D'Halle, — F. Cou-
 terot, Chanoïnereg. Prier, Care. ad. 1750)

I, after subscribing priest, canon-regular,
 curate of St. Sulpice, do certify
 the present extract to be agreeable to its
 original. Delivered at Chalons this 21st
 of October 1750. — Signed,

D. SAIS; Prier, Care.