

PENGUIN PERSONS

BY WALTER PRICHARD EATON

AFTER all, one knows so little about a man from his printed works! They are the gleanings of his thoughts and investigations, the pick of his mind and heart; and they are at best but an impersonal and partial record of the writer. Even autobiography has something unsatisfactory about it; one feels the narrator is on guard always, as it were, and, aware of an audience cold and of strangers, keeps this back and trims up that to make himself more what he should be (or, in some perverse cases, what he should not be!). But probably no man who is worthy of attention sits down to write a letter to a good friend with one eye on posterity and the public. In his intimate correspondence he is off guard. Hence, some day, when he has died, the world comes to know him by fleeting glimpses as he was, — which is almost as near, is it not, as we ever get to knowing one another? — knows him under his little private moods, in the spell of his personal joys and sorrows, sees his flashes of unexpected humor, — even, it may be, his unexpected pettinesses. Thus dangerous and thus delightful is it to publish a great man's letters.

Such letters were Ruskin's to Charles Eliot Norton, which Professor Norton has recently given to the world. No one can fail from those letters to get a more intimate picture of the author of *Modern Painters* than could ever be imagined out of that work itself, and out of the rest of his works beside, not excepting the wonderful *Fors Clavigera*; and not only a more intimate, but a different picture, touched with greater whimsicality, and with infinite sadness, too. Not his hard-wrung thoughts and theories, but his moods of the moment — and he was a man rich in the moods of the moment — tell most prominently here. And with

how many of these moods can the Ordinary Reader sympathize! Again and again as the Ordinary Reader turns the pages he finds the great man under the thralldom of the same insect cares and annoyances which rule us all, until he realizes as perhaps never before that poet and peasant, genius and scribe, are indeed one in a common humanity, and sighs, with a lurking smile of satisfaction, "So nigh is grandeur to our dust!"

One of these points of convergence between Ruskin and the Ordinary Reader which has appealed to me with peculiar force occurs in a letter from London dated in 1860. "When I begin to think at all," Ruskin writes, "I get into states of disgust and fury at the way the mob is going on (meaning by the mob, chiefly Dukes, crown-princes, and such like persons) that I choke; and have to go to the British Museum and look at Penguins till I get cool. I find Penguins at present the only comfort in life. One feels everything in the world so sympathetically ridiculous; one can't be angry when one looks at a Penguin."

Why, of course one can't! It is absurdly true, when one comes to think of it, this beneficent influence of penguins, stuffed penguins, at that, which cannot even waddle. I dare say few readers ever thought of this peculiar bird (if it is a bird) in just that light before Mr. Ruskin's letter came to view; I'm sure I never did. But few readers will fail to recall at a first reading of the words that picture of a penguin which used to adorn the school geographies, and presently will come to them the old sensation of amusement at the waddy fellow propped up on his impossible feet, the smile will break over their lips, and they will be one in mood with Mr. Ruskin. They may af-

firm that of course the author was only indulging in a little whimsicality, and they may two thirds believe it, as it is no doubt two thirds true; but just the same, unless I am much mistaken, the image of a penguin will persist in their minds, as it persisted in Ruskin's mind—else how did he come to write of it in this letter?—and they will be the better and the happier for the smile it evokes, as Ruskin was the better and the happier. Indeed, that letter was his cheeriest for months.

For me, however, the image has not faded with the passing of the mood, or rather it has changed into something more abiding. It has assumed, in fact, no less a guise than the human; it has become converted into certain of my friends. I now know these friends, in my thoughts of them, as Penguin Persons. I find they have the same beneficent effect on me, and on others around them, as the penguins on Ruskin. I mean here to sing their praises, for I believe that they and their kind (since every one enters on his list of friends, as I do, some Penguin Persons) have, even if they do not know it, a mission in the world, an honorable destiny to fulfill. They prevent us from taking life too seriously; they make everything "sympathetically ridiculous;" they are often "as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."

But, at the very outset, I would not be misunderstood. I do not mean that a Penguin Person must resemble the amusing bird in physical aspect. There are, I know, certain people, a far more numerous class than is generally supposed, who see in almost everybody a resemblance to some animal, bird, or fish. I am one of these people myself. It is on record as far back as the fourth generation that some one of my successive ancestors had the same unhappy faculty, for it is unhappy, since it imposes on the person who resembles for us a pig, in our thoughts of him, the attributes of that beast, and so on through the natural history catalogue. It is not pleasant to watch a puma kitten sitting beside you in the opera house, es-

pecially when your mere brain tells you she is probably a sweet, even-tempered little matron, or to wait in pained expectancy for your large-eared minister to bray, even though you know he will not depart from his measured exposition of sound and sane doctrine. However, the Penguin Persons are such by virtue of their moral and mental attributes solely, of the similar effect they produce on those about them by their personalities. I have never met a man yet who physically resembled a penguin, though I fancy the experience would be interesting.

Still less would I have it understood that Penguin Persons are stupid. Far from it. Dr. Crothers declares, in his *Gentle Reader*, that he would not like to be neighbor to a wit. "It would be like being in proximity to a live wire," he says. "A certain insulating film of kindly stupidity is needed to give a margin of safety to human intercourse." I do not think that Dr. Crothers could have known a Penguin Person when he wrote that. The Penguin Person is not a wit, there is no barb to his shafts of fun, no uneasiness from his preternatural cleverness, for he is not preternaturally clever. You never feel unable to cope with him, you never feel your mind keyed to an unusual alertness to follow him; you feel, indeed, a sense of comforting superiority, for, after all, you *do* take the world so much more seriously than he! And yet he is not stupid; he is bright, alert, "kindly," to be sure, but delightfully humorous, deliciously droll. Life with him appears to be one huge joke, and there is an unction about him, a contagion in his point of view, that affects you whether you will or no, and when you are in his presence you cannot take life seriously, either,—you can but laugh with him. He does you good. You say he is "perfectly ridiculous," but you laugh. Then he smiles back at you and cracks another of those absurd remarks of his, and you know he is "sympathetically ridiculous." Perhaps you were out of sorts with life when you met him, but one cannot be angry when one looks at a Penguin Person.

But do you say that the original bird is not like that at all, that he is the most stupid of fellows? Ah! then you have never seen a penguin swim! He is grace and beauty and skill in the water. If it were only his stupidity that made us smile, not he, but the hen, would be the most amusing of God's creatures. It is something more subtle, more personal, than that. It can only be described as Penguinity.

Penguinity! The word is not in the dictionaries; it is beyond the pale of the "purists;" in coining it I am fully aware that I violate the canons of the Harvard English Department, that I fly in the face of philology, waving a red rag. Yet I do it gladly, assertively, for I have confidence that some day, when Penguin Persons have taken their rightful place in the world's estimation, the world will not be able to dispense with my little word, which will then overthrow the dictionary despotism and enter unchallenged the leather strongholds of Webster and Murray. Who knows, indeed, but its triumph may come in the next century?

Yet before that day does come, and to hasten its coming, I would record a tribute to my first and firmest Penguin friend, — my friend and the friend of how many others? — long and lank of limb, thin and high-boned of face, alert, smiling, ridiculous. On the nights when steamships were sunk in the East River, or incipient subways elevated suddenly above ground, or other exciting features of New York life came clamoring for publicity, he would sit calm and smiling, coatless, a corn-cob pipe between his teeth, and read "copy" with the speed of two ordinary men. The excited night city editor would rush about, shouting orders and countermanding them; reporters would dash in and out; telegraph instruments would buzz; the nerve-wracking whistle of the tube from the composing room would shrill at sudden intervals, causing everybody to start involuntarily each time and to curse with vexation and anger; the irritable night editor, worried lest he miss the outgoing trains with his first edition,

would look furtively at the clock at three-minute periods and plunge his grimy hand over his sweating forehead; but the Penguin Person would sit smiling at his place by the "copy" desk, blue pencil in hand, serene amid the Babel. And when the tension was greatest, the strain nerve-breaking to get the big story, in all its complete and coherent details, into the hungry presses that seemed almost visible, though they waited the stroke of one, ten stories down, in the sub-basement, the Penguin Person would sit back in his chair, grin amiably, and say with a drawl, "Hell, ain't it, fellers? D' you know what I'm going to do to-morrow, though? I'm going to put on my asbestos collar, sidetrack some beaut, take her to the theatre, and after the show, thanks to the princely salary I'm paid for keeping split infinitives out of this sheet, I'm going to rush her round to Sherry's or Delmonico's and blow her to a glass of beer and a frankfurter."

Then as if by magic the drawn faces of all his associates would clear, the night editor would laugh and forget to look at the clock, we would resume our toil, momentarily forgetful of the high pressure under which we labored, and working the better for the forgetfulness; and the Penguin Person, the smile still expanding his mouth, would tilt down his chair and work with us, only faster. If he had serious thoughts, he never disclosed them to us — seriously. When he opened his lips we waited always in the expectation of some ridiculous remark, even though it should clothe a platitude or a piece of good, common-sense advice. And we were never disappointed. Life with him was apparently one huge joke, and it came about that when we thought of him or spoke of him among ourselves, it was always with a smile. Yet now he is gone — and what a hole! Other men can do his work as well, if not as quickly. The paper still goes to press and the public sees no change; but we, who worked beside him, see it nightly. By twelve o'clock on a busy night nervous, drawn faces surround the central desk,

and profanity is snapped crossly back and forth. There is no alleviation of cheerful inanity. Presently somebody looks up, remarking, "I wish Bobbie Barton was back." And somebody else replies with profane asperity and lax grammar, "I wish he was!" Bobbie, meanwhile, has become a lawyer, and can now afford a whole plate of frankfurters at Delmonico's. But we are the poorer, and, I do not hesitate to declare, the worse men for the loss of his Penguinity.

Then there is David. David is penguinacious by fits and starts, not wholly to be depended on, sometimes needing himself to be cheered with the Penguinity of others, but, when the mood is on him, softly, fantastically ridiculous, like the nonsense verse of Lewis Carroll, a sort of *Alice in Wonderland* person. I should not hesitate to recommend him to Dr. Crothers as a neighbor; indeed, I suspect the good doctor is almost such a man himself, — too gentle, too fantastic in humor to suggest, however remotely, a "live wire," and yet how far from being stupid! David's mind works so unexpectedly. You are quite sure you know what he is going to say, and yet he never says it, giving his remark a verbal twist which calls up some absurdly impossible picture, and evokes, not a laugh, but a deep, satisfying smile. There is something quaint and refreshing about such a mind as David's. It does not so much restore one's animal spirits, or one's good nature, as it rejuvenates the springs of fancy, brings back the whimsical imagination of childhood. David will people a room with his airy conceits, as Mr. Barrie peopled Kensington Gardens with Peter Pan and his crew; and it is as impossible not to forget anger and care, not to feel sweeter and fresher, for David's jests, as for *The Little White Bird*. Only a Penguinity like David's is subtle, a little unworldly, and, like most gracious gifts, fragile. There are days when the world is too much for David, when his jests are silent and his conceits do not assemble. Then it is that he in turn needs the good

cheer of another's Penguinity, and it is then my happy privilege to reward him by hunting up Bobbie Barton, if I can, and joining them at a dinner party. Bobbie's Penguinity is based on an inexhaustible fount of animal spirits, he is never anything but a Penguin. He usually has David put to rights by the roast.

The other day, while Bobbie was running on in his ridiculous fashion, in an idiom all his own that even Mr. Ade could not hope to rival, telling, I believe, about some escapade of his at Asbury Park, where he had "put the police force of two men and three niggers out of business" by asking the innocent and unsuspecting chief the difference between a man who had seen Niagara Falls, and one who had n't, and a ham sandwich, I fell to musing on Ruskin's unhappy lot, who did not know Bobbie, nor apparently anybody like him. Poor Ruskin! After all, there is more pathos than humor in his periodic visits to the penguins. Isolated, from childhood, by parental care, from the common friendships and associations of life, still further isolated in mature years by his own genius and early and lasting intellectual eminence, the wonder is that he was not more unhappy, rather than less. He had few friends, and those few, like Professor Norton, were intellectual companions as well, always ready and eager to debate with him the problems of Art and Life which were forever vexing him. Their companionship must often have been a stimulant — when he needed, perhaps, a narcotic. Their intercourse drove him continually in upon himself, where there was only seething unrest, when he needed so often to be taken completely out of himself, where there was peace. And, in his hours of need, he turned to the Alps, and the penguins. But both were dumb things, after all, that could not quite meet his mood, could not quite satisfy that hunger which is in all of us for the common association of our kind, for the humble jest and cheery laugh of a smiling humanity. Neither of them was Bobbie, who adds

personality to the penguin, and satisfies a double need.

Bobbie would not have talked Art with Ruskin, and for a very good reason,— he knows nothing about it. Bobbie would not have cared a snap about his Turners, though he would have been greatly reverent of them for their owner's sake. But Bobbie would have enjoyed tramping over the mountains with him, an eager and alert listener to all his talks about geology and clouds, and ten to one Bobbie would have made friends of every peasant they met, every fellow traveler on the road, and taught Ruskin in turn a good bit about humdrum, picturesque mankind. And he would have made him laugh! Possibly you think it incongruous, impossible, the picture of happy-go-lucky, ridiculous Bobbie, with his slang and his grin and his outlook on life, and Ruskin, the great critic, the master of style, the intellectual giant. But then you reckon without Bobbie's quality of Penguinity, and without Ruskin's humanness. It is alike impossible to withstand the contagion of Bobbie's Penguinity, and to fancy a genius so great that he does not at times yearn for the common walks and the common talks of his humbler fellow creatures. He may not always know how to achieve them, his own greatness may be a barrier he cannot cross, or his temperament and circumstances may hinder; but be sure that he feels the loss, though he may not himself, for all his genius, be quite aware of it. That Ruskin lived in moody isolation, while Shakespeare caroused in an alehouse, does not prove Ruskin the greater man or the deeper seer; it only shows that one knew how to achieve what the other did not,— contact with the everyday, merry world, escape from the awful and everlasting solemnity of life. Ruskin could not achieve it for himself, he did not know how; but Bobbie, all unknown to either of them, would have shown him. Bobbie would have made life for him "sympathetically ridiculous," for Bobbie is a Penguin Person. And Bobbie would have been a living, breath-

ing human being, by his side and ready to aid him, even to creep into his heart; not a stuffed biped on a shelf in a musty museum. Poor Ruskin, how much life robbed him of when it made it impossible for him to win in his youth the careless, unthinking, but undying friendship of a few men like Bobbie, a few Penguin Persons!

Ah, well! "The dice of God are always loaded." Doubtless we must always pay for greatness by isolation, or some more bitter toll. And for our insignificance, in turn, come the Bobbies as reward. It behooves those of us, then, who are insignificant, to appreciate our blessing, to cherish our penguins, the more since we, when "the world is too much with us," when the tyranny of economic conditions oppresses and the wrongness of life seems almost more than we can bear, have not that inward strength, that Titanic defiance, which is the possession of the great, ultimately to fall back upon, and so sorely need to be shown a joke somewhere, anywhere, in the universal scheme, to find something that is "sympathetically ridiculous." That is why the Penguin Persons are sent to us; thus we can see in them the swing of the Emersonian pendulum.

But they are naturally modest, and doubtless have no idea of their mission, further than to realize that "people are glad to have them around," as Bobbie would express it, and that it is "up to them" (in the same idiom) to be cheerful,— not a hard task, since cheeriness sits in their soul. It is awful to think how self-consciousness might ruin the flavor of their Penguinity if they ever were awakened to a realization of the fact that they were involved in anything so serious as the Law of Compensation! Though I do believe that David at his best could make the eternal verities look ridiculous. No, when the Penguin Persons do become aware of their Penguinity, it is in a funny, shamefaced fashion, as if they had been up to boyish tricks their manhood should blush for. Came Bobbie to me the other

day and confessed that he had about made up his mind to be "serious."

"Everybody thinks I'm a joke," he said, with a melancholy grin, "they always expect me to say something asinine, and get ready to laugh before I speak. What shall I do?"

"Do!" I cried. "Do what you've been doing, only do it more. Keep right on being a Penguin, and God bless you!"

Bobbie looked perplexed and a little hurt, but I was too wise to explain, and three minutes later he was rattling off some delicious absurdity to my four-year-old hopeful, who had fallen down on his nose and needed comforting — and a handkerchief. Bobbie was supplying the latter from his pocket, and from his penguinacious brain the former was effectively coming in the shape of a description of Rocky Mountain sheep, which, according to Bobbie, have right-side legs much shorter than their left-side legs, so they can run along the mountain slopes without ever falling down on *their* noses.

"But how do they get back?" asks the hopeful, still bleeding, but eager for information.

"They put out their heads between their hind legs and run backward," says Bobbie. "They have long necks, you know."

That, of course, may be unnatural history, but it was a very present help in
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time of trouble. Indeed, it made Bobbie, as well as the boy, forget, and I have heard no more of his dreadful intention to be serious.

Some one — probably it was Emerson — once said, "Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call." It is no small thing, in this grim world, to make people smile, to be absurd for their alleviation, to render all things "sympathetically ridiculous" for a time, to bear in a chalice of mirth the water of Lethe. If one's talent lies that way, why, the call should be clear! The Penguin Person should have no doubt or shame of his vocation, nor should any one else allow him to. Little Joe Weber, who is on the stage the most perfect example of Penguinity, is as a stage character beloved of all the thousands who have seen him. He has heard his call and followed his vocation, and honor and wealth and fame are his. The merry host of Penguin Persons who move outside the radius of the spluttering calcium, whose proscenium is the door frame of a home, may earn neither wealth nor fame by doing as he has done, but they will win no less a reward, for they will have lightened for all around them the burdens of life, they will have smoothed the gathering frown and summoned the forgotten laugh, they will have made of the ridiculous a little religion, and out of Penguinity brought peace.

THE CONTRIBUTORS' CLUB

THE PARIS OF DISCONTENT

"In the whole class of socially disturbing topics," writes Mr. John Graham Brooks, "the freest and deepest opinions are not usually printed in a book." Among the few exceptions which may be cited as proving the rule, surely the most notable is Mr. A. F. Sanborn's *Paris and the Social Revolution*.¹ After "reverently" dedicating his book to the proletariat of America, the author describes himself as "a conservative of conservatives only prevented from being a reactionary by the fact that reaction is but another form of revolution and the most hopeless and faith-exacting of them all." Is this humor of the Mark Twain brand, or does it represent a deficit in that self-knowledge which the Greek philosopher thought a desirable adjunct to human character? If the confession is to be taken seriously, the writer must be congratulated upon attainment of that objectivity of judgment which is the first requirement of scientific investigation. Nothing is here distorted by that emotional bias which most of us find it difficult to resist.

The book seems to me of marked and permanent interest. It shows us quite another Paris than the radiant city to which good (and of course well-to-do) Americans have been said to make post-humous pilgrimage. It more resembles a Paris which I looked upon one December day more than fifty years ago. Standing upon a boulevard, I saw the raising of a barricade by men with fire in their eyes and patriotism in their hearts, bound to resist, unto death if need be, the *coup d'état* which created the second empire. Already I had listened to individual voices bitter with disappointment, opposition, and hatred. Now they were combined into one fierce battle-shout, as the Gym-

¹ Boston: Small & Maynard. 1905.

nase Theatre and the buildings about it were pillaged for materials to intercept the approaching troops. The same forces of revolt which I then saw superficially, Mr. Sanborn has studied exhaustively. Circumstances have changed; but discontent and aspiration persist. The prayer for the French republic then went up to the heavenly powers. At length it has been granted, and — to reverse the incidents in the fable — the *bourgeois* king log is quite as objectionable as his predecessor, the imperial stork.

Suppressed for the moment is the Paris of anarchy, of arrogant vision, of honest discontent, which is revealed in these pages; yet there it quickens beneath the dazzling surface seen from the windows of the cosmopolitan hotel, or from the banqueting-hall of some American millionaire who has found relief from the comment and criticism of his countrymen. Is the stability of the present order overestimated? Are the sudden forces leagued against it underestimated? Some approximate answer to these questions must be attempted by the reader of this book. For he is permitted to hear in its harshest note the cry for human betterment which can never be suppressed, and which, freed from the conditions of locality, concerns every nation upon earth. We are shown the demand of anarchy and its upward pressure by spoken word and printer's ink; we hear its defiance of the *bourgeoisie* as represented by its presidents, generals, and police prefects. And then comes that *propagande par le fait* which we may permit ourselves to admire in the dim historical distance of Harmodius and Aristogiton, provided we shake our heads doubtfully at the nearer Cromwell, and condemn in honor when Vaillant throws the bomb into the French Chamber or Bresci kills King Humbert of Italy. By no such diabolism, it is safe to say, can