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PENGUIN  
ISLAND

ANATOLE FRANCE

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**PENGUIN ISLAND**

## PREFACE



IN spite of the apparent diversity of the amusements that seem to attract me, my life has but one object. It is wholly bent upon the accomplishment of one great scheme. I am writing the history of the Penguins. I labour sedulously at this task without allowing myself to be repelled by its frequent difficulties although at times these seem insuperable.

I have delved into the ground in order to discover the buried remains of that people. Men's first books were stones, and I have studied the stones that can be regarded as the primitive annals of the Penguins. On the shore of the ocean I have ransacked a previously untouched tumulus, and in it I found, as usually happens, flint axes, bronze swords, Roman coins, and a twenty-sou piece bearing the effigy of Louis-Philippe I., King of the French.

For historical times, the chronicle of Johannes Talpa, a monk of the monastery of Beargarden, has been of great assistance to me. I steeped myself the more thoroughly in this author as no other source for the Penguin history of the Early Middle Ages has yet been discovered.

We are richer for the period that begins with the thirteenth century, richer but not better off. It is extremely difficult to write history. We do not know exactly how things have happened, and the historian's embarrassment increases with the abundance

of documents at his disposal. When a fact is known through the evidence of a single person, it is admitted without much hesitation. Our perplexities begin when events are related by two or by several witnesses, for their evidence is always contradictory and always irreconcilable.

It is true that the scientific reasons for preferring one piece of evidence to another are sometimes very strong, but they are never strong enough to outweigh our passions, our prejudices, our interests, or to overcome that levity of mind common to all grave men. It follows that we continually present the facts in a prejudiced or frivolous manner.

I have confided the difficulties that I experienced in writing the history of the Penguins to several learned archæologists and palæographers both of my own and foreign countries. I endured their contempt. They looked at me with a pitying smile which seemed to say: "Do *we* write history? Do you imagine that we attempt to extract the least parcel of life or truth from a text or a document? We publish texts purely and simply. We keep to their exact letter. The letter alone is definite and perceptible. It is not so with the spirit; ideas are crotchets. A man must be very vain to write history, for to do so requires imagination."

All this was in the glances and smiles of our masters in palæography, and their behaviour discouraged me deeply. One day after a conversation with an eminent sigillographer, I was even more depressed than usual, when I suddenly thought:

"After all, there *are* historians; the race has not entirely disappeared. Some five or six of them have been preserved at the Academy of Moral Sciences. They do not publish texts; they write history. They

will not tell me that one must be a vain fellow to take up that sort of work."

This idea restored my courage.

The following day I called upon one of them, an astute old man.

"I came, sir," said I to him, "to ask for the advice that a man of your experience can give. I am taking the utmost trouble in composing a history and I reach no result whatever."

He answered me, shrugging his shoulders:

"What is the good, my dear sir, of giving yourself so much trouble, and why compose a history when all you need do is to copy the best-known ones in the usual way? If you have a fresh view or an original idea, if you present men and things from an unexpected point of view, you will surprise the reader. And the reader does not like being surprised. He never looks in a history for anything but the stupidities that he knows already. If you try to instruct him you only humiliate him and make him angry. Do not try to enlighten him; he will only cry out that you insult his beliefs.

"Historians copy from one another. Thus they spare themselves trouble and avoid the appearance of presumption. Imitate them and do not be original. An original historian is the object of distrust, contempt, and loathing from everybody.

"Do you imagine, sir," added he, "that I should be respected and honoured as I am if I had put innovations into my historical works? And what are innovations? They are impertinences."

He rose. I thanked him for his kindness and reached the door. He called me back.

"One word more. If you want your book to be well received, lose no opportunity for exalting

the virtues on which society is based—attachment to wealth, pious sentiments, and especially resignation on the part of the poor, which latter is the very foundation of order. Proclaim, sir, that the origins of property—nobility and police—are treated in your history with all the respect which these institutions deserve. Make it known that you admit the supernatural when it presents itself. On these conditions you will succeed in good society.”

I have given much thought to these judicious observations and I have given them the fullest weight.

I have not here to deal with the Penguins before their metamorphosis. They begin to come within my scope only at the moment when they leave the realm of zoology to enter those of history and theology. It was in truth Penguins that the great St. Maël changed into men, though it is necessary to explain this, for to-day the term might give rise to confusion.

We call by the name of Penguin in French, a bird of the Arctic regions belonging to the family of the *Alcides*; we call the type of the *spheniscides*, inhabiting the Antarctic seas, manchots. Thus M. G. Lecointe, for example, says in his narrative of the voyage of the *Belgica*:\* “Of all birds that people the Strait of Gerlache, the manchots are certainly the most interesting. They are sometimes designated, though inaccurately, under the name of the penguins of the South.” Doctor J. B. Charcot affirms,† on the contrary, that the true and only Penguins are those Antarctic birds which we call

\* G. Lecointe, “Au Pays des manchots.” Brussels, 1904. 8vo.

† J. B. Charcot, “Journal de l’expédition antarctique française. 1903-1905.” Paris. 8vo.



manchots, and he gives for reason that they received from the Dutch, who in 1598 reached Cape Magellan, the name of *pinguinos*, doubtless because of their fat. But if the manchots are called penguins what are we in future to call the Penguins themselves? Dr. J. B. Charcot does not tell us, and he does not seem to have given the matter a moment's attention.

Well, that his manchots become or re-become Penguins is a matter to which we must consent. He has acquired the right to name them by discovering them. But let him at least allow the Northern penguins to remain penguins. There will be the penguins of the South and those of the North, the Antarctic and the Arctic, the alcidés or old penguins, and the spheniscidés or former manchots. This will perhaps cause embarrassment to ornithologists who are careful in describing and classing the palmipedes; they will doubtless ask if a single name is really suited to two families who are poles apart from one another and who differ in several respects, particularly in their beaks, winglets, and claws. For my part, I adapt myself easily to this confusion. Whatever be the differences between my penguins and those of M. J. B. Charcot, the resemblances are more numerous and more deep-seated. The former, like the latter, attract notice by their grave and placid air, their comic dignity, their trustful familiarity, their sly simplicity, their habits at once awkward and solemn. Both are pacific, abounding in speech, eager to see anything novel, immersed in public affairs, and perhaps a little jealous of all that is superior to them.

My hyperboreans have, it is true, winglets that are not scaly, but covered with little feathers, and,



although their legs are fixed a little farther back than those of the Southernns, they walk in the same way with their chests lifted up and their heads held aloft, balancing their bodies in a like dignified style, and their sublime beak (*os sublime*) is not the least cause of the error into which the apostle fell when he took them for men.

The present work, I cannot but recognise, belongs to the old order of history, to that which presents the sequence of events whose memory has been preserved, to the order which indicates, as far as possible, causes and effects. It is an art rather than a science. It is claimed that this method no longer satisfies exact minds, and that the ancient Clio is to-day looked upon as a teller of old wives' fables. And possibly we shall have in the future a more trustworthy history, a history of the conditions of life, which will teach us what a given people at a given epoch produced and consumed in every department of its activity. History of that type will be no longer an art but a science, and it will assume the exactness which the former history lacked. But in order that it may come into existence, it has need of a multitude of statistics which is hitherto wanting among all peoples and particularly among the Penguins. It is possible that modern nations may one day provide the elements of such a history. As regards what is already past we must always content ourselves, I fear, with a narrative in the ancient style. The interest of such a narrative depends above all on the perspicacity and good faith of the narrator.

As a great writer of Alca has said, the life of a people is a tissue of crime, wretchedness, and folly.

Penguinia did not differ in this respect from other nations; nevertheless, its history contains some admirable sections upon which I hope that I have cast much fresh light.

The Penguins remained warlike for a lengthy period. One of them, Jacquot, the Philosopher, has painted their character in a little moral picture that I reproduce here, and that, doubtless, will not be read without pleasure:

The philosopher, Gratien, travelled through Penguinia in the time of the later Draconides. One day as he passed through a pleasant valley where the cow-bells tinkled in the pure air, he seated himself on a bench at the foot of an oak, close beside a cottage. At the threshold a woman was nursing her child; a little boy was playing with a big dog; a blind old man, seated in the sun with his lips half-opened, drank in the light of day.

The master of the house, a young and sturdy man, offered some bread and milk to Gratien.

The Porpoise philosopher having taken this rural repast:

"Delightful inhabitants of a delightful country, I give you thanks," said he. "Everything here breathes forth joy, concord, and peace."

As he said this a shepherd passed by playing a march upon his pipe.

"What is that lively air?" asked Gratien.

"It is the war-hymn against the Porpoises," answered the peasant. "Everybody here sings it. Little children know it before they can speak. We are all good Penguins."

"You don't like the Porpoises then?"

"We hate them."

"For what reason do you hate them?"

"Need you ask? Are not the Porpoises neighbours of the Penguins!"

"Of course."

"Well, that is why the Penguins hate the Porpoises."

"Is that a reason?"

"Certainly. He who says neighbours says enemies. Look at the field that borders mine. It belongs to the man I hate most in the world. After him my worst enemies are the people of the village on the other slope of the valley at the foot of that birchwood. In this narrow valley formed of two parts there are but that village and mine: they are enemies. Every time that our lads meet the others, insults and blows pass between them. And you want the Penguins not to be enemies of the Porpoises! Don't you know what patriotism is? For my part there are but two cries that rise to my lips: 'Hurrah for the Penguins! Death to the Porpoises!' "

During thirteen centuries the Penguins made war upon all the peoples in the world with a constant ardour and diverse fortunes. Then for some years they tired of what they had loved so long and showed a marked preference for peace which they expressed with dignity, indeed, but in the most sincere accents. Their generals adapted themselves very well to this new humour; all their army, officers, non-commissioned officers, and men, conscripts and veterans, took pleasure in conforming to it. None but scribblers and book-worms complained of the change and the cut-throats alone refused to be consoled on account of it.

This same Jacquot, the Philosopher, composed a sort of moral tale in which he represented in a

comic and lively fashion the diverse actions of men, and he mingled in it several passages from the history of his own country. Some persons asked him why he had written this feigned history and what advantage, according to him, his country would derive from it.

"A very great one," answered the philosopher. "When they see their actions travestied in this way and lopped of all which flattered them, the Penguins will judge better, and, perhaps, become more reasonable."

I desired to omit nothing from this history that could interest artists. There is a chapter on Penguin painting in the Middle Ages, and if that chapter is not so complete as I desired the fault is not mine, as you can see from reading the terrible recital with which I end this preface.

The idea occurred to me, in the month of June last year, to go and consult on the origins and progress of Penguin art, the lamented M. Fulgence Tapir, the learned author of the "Universal Annals of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture."

Having been shown into his study, I found seated before a roll-top desk, beneath a frightful mass of papers, an amazingly short-sighted little man whose eyelids blinked behind his gold-mounted spectacles.

To make up for the defeat of his eyes his long and mobile nose, endowed with an exquisite sense of touch, explored the sensible world. By means of this organ Fulgence Tapir put himself in contact with art and beauty. It is observed that in France, as a general rule, musical critics are deaf and art critics are blind. This allows them the collectedness necessary for æsthetic ideas. Do you imagine that with eyes capable of perceiving the forms and

colours with which mysterious nature envelops herself, Fulgence Tapir would have raised himself, on a mountain of printed and manuscript documents, to the summit of doctrinal spiritualism, or that he would have conceived that mighty theory which makes the arts of all times and countries converge towards the Institute of France, their supreme end?

The walls of the study, the floor, and even the ceiling were loaded with overflowing bundles, paste-board boxes swollen beyond measure, boxes in which were compressed an innumerable multitude of small cards covered with writing. I beheld in admiration mingled with terror the cataracts of erudition that threatened to burst forth.

"Master," said I in feeling tones, "I throw myself upon your kindness and your knowledge, both of which are inexhaustible. Would you consent to guide me in my arduous researches into the origins of Penguin art?"

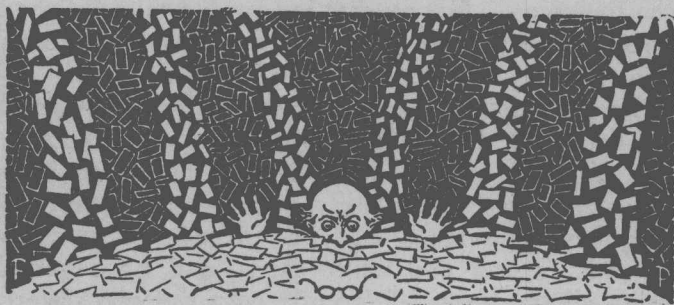
"Sir," answered the Master, "I possess all art, you understand me, all art, on cards classed alphabetically and in order of subjects. I consider it my duty to place at your disposal all that relates to the Penguins. Get on that ladder and take out that box you see above. You will find in it everything you require."

I tremblingly obeyed. But scarcely had I opened the fatal box than some blue cards escaped from it, and slipping through my fingers, began to rain down. Almost immediately, acting in sympathy, the neighbouring boxes opened, and there flowed streams of pink, green, and white cards, and by degrees, from all the boxes, differently coloured cards were poured out murmuring like a waterfall on a moun-

tain-side in April. In a minute they covered the floor with a thick layer of paper. Issuing from their inexhaustible reservoirs with a roar that continually grew in force, each second increased the vehemence of their torrential fall. Swamped up to the knees in cards, Fulgence Tapir observed the cataclysm with attentive nose. He recognised its cause and grew pale with fright.

"What a mass of art!" he exclaimed.

I called to him and leaned forward to help him mount the ladder which bent under the shower. It was too late. Overwhelmed, desperate, pitiable, his velvet smoking-cap and his gold-mounted spectacles having fallen from him, he vainly opposed his short arms to the flood which had now mounted to his arm-pits. Suddenly a terrible spurt of cards arose and enveloped him in a gigantic whirlpool. During the space of a second I could see in the gulf the shining skull and little fat hands of the scholar; then it closed up and the deluge kept pouring over what was silence and immobility. In dread lest I in my turn should be swallowed up ladder and all I made my escape through the topmost pane of the window.





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