

David Jolly

PENGUINS

You are not going to question my intentions; that would be ludicrous and besides, impossible: there were none. Merely one afternoon I set off to watch penguins at the far side of the zoo. I could have gone to a film or ambled in the park reading a comic with nothing much better to do. Yesterday was replete with intentionless activities. When I reached the concrete terrace for the penguins motiveless beings like myself circled the moat in a thread of clucking and cooing around the motionless clowns on the far side of the water. Gobbits of white bread flicked through the air. It seemed clear however that the imaginations of the penguins could only be engaged by other more subtle actions; all the bread and the blarney of offered peace went unheeded.

On this first visit and on the subsequent two or three I was as human as the rest of the encircling mob, whooping out sighs of affection... "Oh what a duck!... Look at that one, regular emperor's face!... isn't that one lame?" and other such drollery. Clearly something else was needed.

Actual intention dissolved itself through me. My regular visitations to the zoo increased and indeed became unavoidable. Previously haphazard days rapidly acquired rituals: time of departure, length of stay, time of return; order of events; the clothing I wore.

I was soon no normal visitor. For these occasions I began to dress in the most harmonious way possible. Eventually, when I began to attend the zoo almost every day, I borrowed a very long careworn coat of army surplus material which almost covered up the entire white outfit beneath. There were times when I suffered from an undue amount of solemnity on account of my white second layer, the white cotton shirt and the trousers cut from rough white sailcloth. My shoes, once essentially black with their two rows of holes for laces, I had also painted white. They appeared more grey than black but no matter I could point to the attempt at taste. A white bobble-cap was always perched on my head.

Arrival at the garden of the penguins was always attended by panic, and sometimes my own hot sticky sweat rather spoiled that absolute sense of neatness which my white sailcloth otherwise lent me. I never quite got used to the first moments, so unlike the prelude of the brief train-ride. That ride was always fine and wholly reasonable. I tried hard to avoid the stares of other passengers but this was hardly difficult because my thoughts were inevitably elsewhere: in a clear white arctic whiteness ignited all day by a pale lemon sun and with the penguins, black and white, black and white to the rhythm of wheels over rails. It soothed me, leaving me careless of the curiosity which I seemed to arouse in the general public.

There was only one man I can ever remember to have collected tickets from the station where I got off and he too became part of the ritual on account of his unfortunate and re-iterated jest, »Going to the zoo, Archibald?«; but the effect of

that music-hall name and the epilogetic gusty laughter ceased to hold the cruelty I had once experienced. Indeed it gave me status in that part of the world. How odd I must have been in those early days; was it really this left-hand which had contemplated running that same ticket-collector through the gizzard like a modern Sir Launcelot? Maybe I am he still; it seems unlikely.

In the winter, the early months of the year, I took also a pair of mittens in case of snow; no, not as the discovered remedy against the cold but to make it easier for me to mould snowballs. In my planned attacks in my early battles a gross of snowballs would leave my hand to go whizzing among those stationary forms. Rock, rocking from side to side, losing balance, tumble down would go a black and white creature, my third or fourth bird if I was lucky, and so I changed their postures.

I never ceased to be amazed by the ceaseless efforts of the other expeditors, their bandy hand-waving, their caws of affected delight, their virtuous crumb-throwing. They never saw anything objectively between the penguins and themselves for if one thing was clear it was that the penguins were not playing games. Rejecting maudlin affection I alone had taken up the offensive in this most serious affair. I had noticed early on that despite my frequent visits no single penguin would ever recognise me. There were of course many around me who liked to delude themselves with the idea of the penguins' sensitivity for remembering personality but it was all nonsense really. These creatures were certainly not feigning; they didn't recognise. It was all quite simple really, the penguins, Alfa or Constans or any other of the absurdly named birds did not function at all that way. You forget faces in war, there is you and there is a mass of alien stuff. I thought for certain that was it. A little later a more curious idea touched me. Was there really a sameness of 'me's' from day to day. Each time I would present myself in white shoes, bobble-cap and tall coat. But this week my chin would be cupped at a different angle, and my hazel eyes wouldn't reflect the same lemon clouds of the week before. The propped-upon wall would be propped on at a different place. I didn't give up my idea of unstinted aggression towards the penguins until after other events but the seed of another and un-human idea had struck me. If the penguins were at war it was a most curious war of nerves, no signs, no squawks, no nervous re-arrangement of ranks. Exercise, a quick flash around the moat on those truncated flippers took place whether there was bombardment or not. The hobble-hatted aggressor failed to do anything unpredictable.

So I came from one place to another no longer without intentions. Motive had given me motion. In the early days and even later I moved easily between the perfection of my home and the perfect composure of the penguins.

How strange, I have omitted to say anything about home. Of mothers I remember none; it's sisters who have occupied those wooden chairs and whirled the house into order. Something universal ordained myself and my two sisters a trinity so that on Sunday afternoon walks a sedate triangle strolled composedly in the local shrubbery past the massed band. It was just like that; none of our heads turned, there was no need. A trinity is always perfect and speechless. If you had known my sisters you too would have realized how well they regulated. Now I can only recall them, being, as they are, deceased, but in the days of my pilgrimages they were both with me. They never said, »Hello«, or »it's you again«, or other such drivel but used to nod, hand me over my new salad sandwiches, offer me a mug of cocoa and tell me who had been removed by order in the next street. Life was effortlessly merry. My sister's snippets of death reinforced my desire to be off on another pilgrimage to that sanctuary where kings and emperors stood dumb.

The differences between my two sisters were not profound. One was red-faced, the other ashen or 'white' as genteel people liked to put it. Red-face was a gay spark, flourishing in flowing gaudy rags and always tendering one sweet grimaces.

We two shared our silences during the day when she would iron, wash, and pin. Come evening and she was off, a laugh, a mock-curtsey, and away to unspeakable doings with sailors and engine-drivers on the same benches in that sedate Sunday park.

Ash-face came and went alone and was out during the day. She wrote something in the town; was it recipes for soup, or poems, or advertisements? Her pale face gave no trace of her efforts and silence composed her. Such good company they were, both, so sensitive. One week red-face, another, whey-face, flattened out my white outfit for me never asking needless questions, "when are you going again?", or "what will you do this time?" as if anything sensational was likely to happen from one visit to another. Real interest would have pushed them to the zoo too. Our trinity reformed in the early evening. I would munch lettuce. One sister would scuff away on the iron, the other sway gently in the rocking-chair beneath the parrot-cage. We didn't have a parrot, just the cane cage. Tenderness. An idiot parrot would have dragged in all sorts of unnecessary emotions.

For some reason not yet known to any of us this is all in the past now. One pale day towards spring I took my usual train to the penguin garden feeling more than ever my futility in the struggle with those curious beings. On the terrace wall when I arrived were six of them, black and white. My arm came back and hurled a thousandth impertinent snowbomb across the intervening moat. The round weapon landed ineffectually at the feet of the fourth penguin. There was no move. No eye blinked. Nothing was recognized, nothing formed. On a further wall a perfect phalanx of a dozen faced north in inscrutable silence. Slowly I drew a catapult from inside my coat and two or three knobbly stones; perhaps humanity in me was making its last gibbering bid. It is said of Sir Launcelot that the climax of his entire life came in that episode where he killed thirteen knights at his lady's door; in an hour, without remorse. Ever after he longed for death. I fitted the first stone into the elastic belt. Six penguins stood on the terrace wall. I pulled back the elastic and let go. A knobbly stone entered the white breast of the third penguin and it toppled quickly into the dank water of the moat beneath. Putrid human desire had wanted a climax in me also, that of shooting hard and straight at the one lone abtross which ever crossed my path. But I felt nothing. Nothing had changed.

The air was very still. No great army rose towards me. Even more than usual I understood that I was an arbitrary object in a fixed cosmos. Penguins faced the north and my magic interruptions were also arbitrary and of no consequence.

When I returned home that night, red-face and whey-face were gone. For a little while I looked round the place in a rather disorderly fashion but soon gave up and sat down in the rockingchair; to its swaying I inhabited the lemon sky of the arctic. Later there was a knock at the door, a light tap rather, and a nervous-looking boy handed me a slip of scruffy paper.

'Your sisters have been removed, deceased'. I gave, I believe, a little sigh. The following day I moved away from that place and took a room alone quite close to the far side of the zoo. These affairs took some days to arrange and my visitations were forcibly interrupted. At last I was able to return and my change of house had dispensed with the necessity of a train-ride.

I arrived at the edge of the moat in a fine panic, my wild eyes searching the surface of the water for a sign of the recently deceased. A crumpled slip of paper twitched on the ripples along with some ancient crusts and half a bun. On the terrace and as far as the eye could see line on line of black and white birds stood at ease. Once again the golden crack of humanity hadn't managed to split open this perfection.

I believe several people passed, a couple arm in arm, an older man in pin-stripes, gazing at my white togs in the old fashion.

It was a normal day.

Nothing could touch me then as abject humanity seeped into all the other crevices of life. I looked into the dusk of the ranked penguins standing perfectly at ease into the north. Slowly I brought my left leg round parallel to the right so that I too faced north. Nobody spoke. Nothing moved. A motionless clown stood among his mentors.

Lexical Guide

gobbits — small pieces
baloney — nonsense, rubbish
drollery — laughable events, talk
lemon — indicating a pale yellow colour
epilogic — following
gusty — full, as a huge puff of wind, as a gust of wind
gizzard — archaic poetic word for stomach
expeditors — people on an expedition
bandy — usually used for bowed legs
maudlin — tearfully sentimental
bobble-hat — a conical woollen hat with a knitted ball on top
prop upon — lean on
trinity — usually the Christian Godhead
drivel — rubbish, nonsense
snippets — small pieces
tendering — offering
ash-face, whey-face — ashes and whey can both have that grey-cream off-white colour.
phalanx — a company in battle formation
gibbering — as baboons
pin-stripes — the customary black and white striped trousers worn by men working in commerce.
togs — colloquial for outdoor clothes.

Notes for a Critical Examination

- a) Examine the significance of the following words in their contexts:
 - gizzard*
 - postures*
 - deceased*
 - ash-face*
- b) Is there a satirical effect in the following passages and if there is what is it in each case?
 - The passage beginning: "I never ceased to be amazed..."
 - The passage ending: "Life was effortlessly merry..."
 - The sentence: "A trinity is always perfect and speechless"
 - The paragraph: "It was a normal day"
- c) What is one's reaction to the protagonist's description of the differences between his two sisters.
- d) The phrase 'unnecessary emotions' occurs; are there any human emotions in this story? What are they? Does one believe in them?
- e) "The golden crack of humanity". What does that refer to in the context of this story?
- f) In what senses is the protagonist a clown?
- g) How old is the protagonist and if you don't know, why don't you?
- h) In the story human beings are satirised. What are the techniques used: bathos, irony, animal fable, invective, mock-heroics ?
- i) Is the story a mockery of religion or are there aspects in the story which make it seem as if the protagonist has formed a highly personal religion of his own?