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The Penguin Lessons

Written by Tom Michell

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TOM MICHELL

The Penguin Lessons

A TRUE STORY

'Delightful and charming' *Daily Mail*

The Penguin Lessons

TOM MICHELL

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Bath Time

In which more than one of us has a bath we didn't want and a seagull comes to the rescue

As I entered the flat and looked around I realized that I had been carried away with the idea of rescuing the penguin and had not given a thought to the practicalities that cleaning one would involve. The Bellamys' flat was elegant and tasteful. It looked like an advertisement from a glossy magazine – the last place to bring an oil-soaked penguin. The possibility of doing anything that might benefit the bird now began to seem very remote while the chances of making a real mess in the flat, upsetting the Bellamys by spoiling their décor, and getting myself injured into the bargain, all seemed very real. The penguin was filthy and very aggressive. Its beak snapped shut with a metallic clack like a pair of dental pliers as it continually twisted and turned in its attempts to savage me.

For a moment I was tempted to take the bird back to the beach rather than start on a foolhardy course of action that I would likely regret. How could I contain and clean this struggling creature against its will, without damaging it further or wrecking the flat? Then I had an idea.

I had with me a string bag, an old faithful, which I always travelled with because it was so useful. It was like a large version of the nets that oranges are sold in, except that mine was blue and had drawstring handles. I had kept it since my schooldays when we used them for carrying rugby boots and balls, because the mud would simply drop through the holes. Woven into a net of small squares, it was ideal for taking on adventures; it occupied almost no space but was robust enough to carry almost any impulsive acquisition during an expedition, as it was about to demonstrate so admirably now. One-handed, I shook it out and dropped the bird inside before slipping a broomstick through the handles and suspending the bag between the backs of two chairs I had arranged for the purpose. Deftly, I placed newspaper – a copy of *El Día* – on the floor between the chairs and under the bird and, satisfied that I had contained the creature, I set about searching the flat for suitable cleaning agents.

I collected butter and margarine, olive oil and cooking oil, soap, shampoo and detergent, and arranged them in the bathroom. This room, like the rest of the flat, was furnished with taste and deep pockets. Pretty tessellated tiles – salmon pink and fish-shaped – covered the walls, and the floor was a polished black marble. The units themselves were made from ivory-coloured porcelain with gold fittings – I couldn't dream up a more unsuitable place for cleaning a tar-sodden penguin.

After filling the bidet with warm water, I lifted the bag from its temporary support, with the bird still safely inside, and placed it in the bowl. The increasingly irate creature had been struggling and its feet and beak were now protruding,

allowing it the opportunity to clamp one of my fingers in its powerful bill. First blood to the bird! I cursed it as I tried to extract my finger but, terrier-like, it wasn't letting go without a fight. I couldn't believe how hard it could bite; it could have opened a tin of beans with that beak.

'Damn you! Let go!' I yelled as I held its head as gently as my pain and fury would allow and prised its beak open. It had inflicted a deep and painful cut that was bleeding profusely and hurt as much as if I had jammed it in a heavy door. I was astonished that a mere bird could do that amount of damage and examined it in amazement. Leaving the bird in the bidet, entangled in the bag, I attended to my finger. Holding it under cold running water, I could barely believe the extent of the cut; I still carry the scar to this day. I let it bleed into the basin and cursed myself for not leaving the bird where I had found it.

I glowered at the penguin and the penguin stared straight back at me. Unflinching and belligerent, its black, malevolent eyes said it all. They shone with pure loathing and venom:

'Come on then, you great brute! There is more where that came from!' they said.

'Damn you, you stupid . . . stupid bird!' I replied. *'I'm trying to help you! Can't you even understand that, birdbrain?'*

I wrapped my finger in loo paper in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding, continually replacing it as the paper became sodden, and held my hand above my head. My finger was throbbing. What vile diseases did penguins carry, I wondered? After some fifteen minutes I had managed to stem the flow of gore with a gauze bandage and sticking plasters and was reluctantly ready to return to the fray.

It was clear that I was going to have to control the creature far more effectively than I had done so far. I had made the mistake of underestimating my opponent, thinking it was just a little bird when, in fact, it was every bit as big and dangerous as a golden eagle defending its eyrie. I had to immobilize it properly this time. Snatching the bag up by the handles, so it was unable to savage me with either its beak or feet, I suspended the bird between the chairs again and with some of the bandage I prepared a loop which I slipped round its feet and pulled tight as its beak snapped repeatedly on thin air. Penguins have enormous and extremely strong feet, which are equipped with very sharp talons not unlike those of an eagle, and can shred human skin. Interestingly, the undersides of penguins' feet are not a bit bird-like but are more like a monkey's: fleshy, muscular and dexterous. I bound its feet from the back, where its beak couldn't reach me.

While the penguin flapped and floundered ineffectually in the bag, I held its head firmly with newspaper and brute force. Using some stout rubber bands that I had found during my search for cleaning equipment, I encircled its beak several times, carefully avoiding its nostrils, and I terminated the last loop by placing a final twist of rubber across its sharp point. Its feet scrabbled at the air as it tried to twist and turn but, hanging in the bag, it couldn't reach me. It was breathing hard and its pulse was visibly throbbing in its throat and head as it continued to kick and struggle, all to no avail, since it was unable to get a purchase on anything.

Its eyes, normally the size of peas, bulged with fury, frustration and hatred.

'How dare you! I'll make you pay for this! You see if I don't!' they said. It was hard to believe that the penguin had been at death's door only a short time ago. There was nothing for it but to adopt the clinical detachment of a vet. The bird wouldn't survive unless I cleaned it properly.

'Right then, you bloody little bird,' I said. *'Come here! I've got to be cruel to be kind!'* My finger throbbed and hurt and any sympathy I might have felt for the penguin had all but gone down the drain with my blood. Making sure its feet were securely trussed, I tied the handles of the bag around its body to hold its wings close.

Satisfied that it was finally subdued, I put it back in the bidet and began the cleaning process by pouring a handful of washing-up liquid over its back. Now that its beak was no longer a dangerous weapon, I was able to work the detergent into its short, stubby feathers. The task was not made any easier by the dressing on my wounded finger or by the wriggling of the bird, but the string bag worked perfectly as a restraint, holding it gently without restricting the cleaning.

Suddenly, the exhausted penguin lay still. The change in attitude and behaviour was astonishingly rapid, far faster than I can now relate.

Within moments of being a terrified, hostile and resentful animal (which was, quite understandably, determined to exact revenge on me, a representative of the race that had so cruelly exterminated thousands of its closest relatives), it became a docile and cooperative partner in this clean-up operation. The transformation occurred as I washed off the first of the detergent. It were as if the bird had suddenly understood that I was trying to rid it of that disgusting oil

rather than commit murder. I drained the bidet and refilled it with warm water. The penguin's eyes no longer bulged like goldfish bowls. It had ceased shaking its head, trying to flap its wings or inflict damage on me with its beak and feet, but was watching calmly as the water flowed. Its pulse had stopped racing and it no longer looked defiantly straight at me like an aggrieved captive. It was turning its head from side to side, regarding me quizzically with each eye in turn. Penguins are hunters and can look straight ahead with binocular vision but they have the avian habit of looking first with one eye and then with the other.

'*What's your game then? Why are you doing this? Do you know how to clean off this foul muck?*' the eyes asked.

On the second dose of detergent it didn't shrink away. Sensing our relationship was changing, I decided to risk releasing him from the bag, which allowed me to rub the green solvent into the feathers of his back and wings more easily. He held his wings out helpfully so that no part should be missed as the detergent did its work. I rubbed the washing-up liquid all over the penguin's feathers and then scraped off the resulting gooey mixture. After each wash he shook himself like a dog to dry.

Because he had become so cooperative, I removed the elastic band from his beak and untied his feet, which made the cleaning process so very much easier. He made no attempt to peck me or to escape, but his head bobbed about constantly as, with obvious curiosity, he watched my hands working the detergent into his feathers. Looking first with one eye and then the other, he made careful note of the progress being achieved and continually looked at my face to

check that I was paying proper attention to the delicate task I was undertaking.

When the washing-up liquid was finished, I started with the shampoo and so I was able to wash every bit of the bird several times. Standing upright in the bidet, he allowed me to do my work with no resistance at all. Neither did he try to remove any of the soapy, tarry emulsion with his beak, nor make any objection as I carefully cleaned around his face and eyes, which I did with butter alone.

At the end of an hour's work, I had a recognizable penguin. His back feathers were black again, if not sleek and shiny, and his tummy feathers, though not pristine, were at least a greyish sort of white. I let the water out of the bidet for the last time and, when I didn't refill it, the penguin studied me closely. We regarded each other for some moments as I looked directly at the result of my handiwork.

'Is that it? Have you finished? Are we done? I hope you haven't missed any!'

Slowly, my focus moved beyond the bird and out around the bathroom. His shaking after each wash had deposited a thin film of dirty detergent, oil and water over a fair proportion of the walls and, I saw as I looked in the mirror, over me too.

Although he was now clean to the touch, I didn't want him wandering free in the flat so, in order to constrain him, I placed him in the bath while I started to clean both the bathroom and myself. He appeared to be exhausted and lay on his tummy, with occasional shakes of his bottom, watching me while I took a shower and washed the splatterings from my face and hair.

The average penthouse holiday flat is rarely equipped with the necessities for de-tarring penguins and the Bellamys' was certainly no exception, so I made a quick trip to the local market, where I bought large quantities of paper towels and replaced the washing-up liquid. I also bought a tin of sardines, the only thing I could find which I thought the penguin might want for his tea. As I shopped, I trawled the recesses of my brain for scraps of whatever knowledge I might have gleaned at some time or another about the Natural History of Penguins because I was just beginning to have a few doubts. A little voice was nagging at me, suggesting that washing seabirds with detergent might remove their natural waterproofing, preventing them from coping in their element; that they would become waterlogged, sink and drown. If that were true, then I'd just done an excellent job of removing every bit of waterproofing from that penguin. After everything we'd been through, I was extremely conscious of his well-being. I was trying to help him, after all, but with no instant access to information on the subject of cleaning seabirds – no opportunity in those days to Google 'how to de-tar a penguin' – I had to rely on memory and common sense.

Walking back to the flat through the deserted streets, the reality of my own situation was also dawning on me, casting a shadow over our progress so far. I had to be up at dawn to begin my journey home to Buenos Aires and there I would have to prepare to go back to work; all of this was arranged and immutable. How could I possibly cope with a disabled penguin in tow? Obviously, I didn't want to keep the penguin. It just wouldn't be possible to keep a penguin in a flat in Buenos Aires. I needed a penguin like a penguin needs a

motorbike. As it happened, a motorbike was my means of transport in Argentina. Unfortunately, with legs like theirs, penguins can't ride pillion!

I reasoned with myself that I had no real evidence about the washing of pelagic birds and it was probably just an old wives' tale anyway. Determinedly, I retraced my steps and prepared to release the penguin back into the sea, so that I could get on with all the important things I had to do in readiness for the start of term. There was simply no question about it, he would just have to return to the ocean and take his chances. I couldn't keep a penguin and he'd be better off with his own kind.

I had left him in the bath and on my return to the bathroom he ran up and down in the tub, flapping his wings. His little eyes were sparkling.

'You've been a long time!' they said. *'I was wondering what had happened to you. What have you been doing?'*

Had he been a dog he would have been wagging his tail and I was convinced he was pleased to see me.

I opened the tin of sardines with the attached key and tried offering him pieces of fish. His reaction was disdainful. I tried putting little bits on his beak, but he vehemently shook them off. When I offered him more, he tucked his beak down on to his chest and his multiple eyelids closed, then opened again to look at me.

'Here, I've brought you some sardines for your tea,' I said.

'Yuck, yuck, yuck! Take it away! What is that filth?'

I gave up, dried him off with the paper towels and set about making him waterproof again by rubbing butter and olive oil into his feathers until he resembled a greased-up

swimmer. Once I was satisfied he was saturated with all the waterproofing materials available to me, I put the penguin in a shopping bag to hide him from the harridan thinly disguised as a concierge. Together, we quietly headed back out to the sea.

Only the coast road separated the Bellamys' apartment from the Atlantic. The beach here was pleasantly sandy with rocky outcrops; there was no sign of the oil spill, nor of the ill-fated penguins which had blanketed the shore stretching away to the north-east of the point.

Crossing the road rapidly, I walked down to the water's edge, placed him on the wet sand and stepped back to watch. I expected him to rush into the sea and swim away, happy to be free once more. But he didn't. He walked straight back to my side. Worse still, he was looking at my face, directly into my eyes even, and appeared to be talking to me.

'Why are you trying to send me back to that deadly oily ocean so soon after we've met and become friends?'

'Go on,' I said, *'go and find your fellow penguins. You can't come with me!'*

But instead he just stood at my feet, looking at me pathetically.

'I can't go back! I can't swim now you've washed out my waterproofing.'

Oh, hell! This was not going according to plan, not at all. I picked him up and carried him out on to the rocks.

'You can't come with me,' I explained patiently. *'I'm going back to Argentina tomorrow. I have to work on Monday. You just can't come with me. You've got to swim off now.'*

A slight swell coming in from the Atlantic was making the water rise and fall by a couple of feet. I waited for a trough, placed him on the rocks and skipped back on to a higher point. Within seconds the next wave came in and he disappeared from view. I waited, straining my eyes in an attempt to catch sight of him swimming off through the water. But, after a few moments, the sea receded again and he was gone. I must have missed him amid the reflections from the surface.

'Goodbye, little bird,' I said. *'Good luck. Henceforth, may your path be untrammelled and untroubled!'* But as I turned to go, there again, struggling out of the water, was a bedraggled penguin. He must have swum round in a circle and failed to find his way out into the open sea. I would just have to try again and place him further out, at the end of the rocks where his way would be clear.

I studied the rocks that could be seen above the water and the frequency of the waves as they came in. The rise and fall of the waves had a period of several seconds between crests. Confident I could get further out to sea, I picked the bird up and waited. Split-second timing was essential.

It was already getting dark and the sea was very cold. I set off across the rocks as the water fell. Counting seconds in my mind, I placed the penguin at the furthest point I thought I could reach and started back. Before I had got halfway, however, I saw I was going to get wet feet. As my stepping stones disappeared under the foam, I missed my footing and found myself stumbling up to my knees in freezing water. 'Hell!' I gasped as a cold sea wave surged around me, soaking me to the waist. Struggling on, I made my way to the

beach, but not before I slipped again, plunging my arm into the sea up to my shoulder in order to save myself from total immersion and skinning my palm in the process.

'Typical! When will you learn to leave well alone?' I asked myself.

I stood on the beach feeling the chill as the wind rose and caused my wet clothes to flap. I looked down at my soaking shoes, my jeans sticking to my legs. I felt the arm of my jacket cling to me as the water drained down my sleeve, streaming from the cuff, and I watched as it cascaded on to the sand below. That was when I became conscious of a pair of feet standing next to mine.

I raised my eyes and realized I was being studied in my discomfort.

'Water's cold, isn't it?'

'Look! I'm soaking wet thanks to you!' I said to the penguin who was now standing beside me, looking me up and down.

'And your waterproofing doesn't work either, does it?' he implied.

I demanded that he get back to his own kind and, walking rapidly back up the beach with water squirting from my shoes, I hoped sincerely that the concierge would still be away. Preventing visitors from trailing seaweed and sand through the building was exactly what she was paid to do.

The retaining wall at the edge of the road was about three feet above the beach and, although there were no steps at that point, an outcrop of rocks provided me with a convenient exit.

What exactly did I feel as I looked back and saw that the bird was now running up the beach after me? I was too wet

and cold and the salt water was stinging the cuts on my hand too much for me to feel pleased by the persistence of the penguin. However, the sea wall was too high for him to scale so once he understood that he couldn't follow me I was sure he'd have no option but to find his own way back to the sea. I would have to force myself to adopt the impartiality of wildlife photographers and resist interfering further – there was simply nothing more I could do for him.

Pausing only to allow a car to pass, I crossed the road and turned towards my apartment block. I glanced back. There, on the opposite side, was a penguin scaling the rocks and walking towards me.

'*Stop!*' I yelled, at both the penguin and a speeding van as it hurtled down the road towards us, but the driver didn't hear me or see the penguin. I dreaded a bump as it passed. None came. Once the vehicle had gone by, there was the bird, walking across the road. Without wasting another second, I rushed over and picked him up. He was soaking wet and felt very cold.

'*What am I going to do with you?*' I asked.

I was reprimanded by that nagging voice in my head again: 'I told you, seabirds can't survive in the water if you wash them with detergent!' Why did it sound so like my mother?

Carefully, I put him into the bag, folded the top over and, holding him against my chest for warmth, walked through the glass doors into the building.

'Oh! Señor, whatever has happened to you? Are you all right?' asked the concierge, who seemed genuinely concerned as she came out from behind her desk, looking at my

wet clothes and the blood dripping to the floor from my hand.

'I'm afraid I slipped by the sea and fell in. I'm fine, really, no bones broken. I just need to have a hot shower before I catch my death of cold.'

'Did you fall from the rocks? They are slippery. Are you sure you didn't hurt yourself badly?'

'No, I'm fine, thank you, really! Absolutely fine. I just need to change,' I said as I manoeuvred round her. My shoes squelched and left sandy puddles where I stepped. I was anxious to get away quickly before she came fussing around me and discovered the penguin. 'Oh, I'm sorry about the mess! I'll clean it all up just as soon as I've changed.' Without waiting for a reply, I rushed up the stairs.

'Leave it to me, señor,' she called after me. 'You go and have a hot shower!' Of course, it was a different concierge on duty. Perhaps not all the fates were against me.

Back in the flat, I returned the penguin to the bath and dried him off once again with paper towels, took a quick shower and put my things on the radiators to dry. Then I busied myself trying to remove any shred of evidence that might betray the fact I had allowed a penguin into the Bellamys' bathroom, a task which took just as long as the cleaning of the bird. When all was done, I checked my packing, the hydrofoil reservation and timetable, and began to think about

dinner. I'd eaten everything in the fridge but the apple and the penguin's sardines, neither of which seemed adequate for the last night of my holiday. I had planned to eat out, but that was before I had a penguin to look after. Making sure he was thoroughly dry, I returned the bird to the bath, for there was nothing more I could do for him. I picked up my book and decided it would be safe to go out for dinner.

I was reluctantly coming to the conclusion that I would have to try to take him back to Argentina with me. My timetable was too tight to allow me to look for a zoo in Montevideo and deposit him there and, besides, if I took him to the zoo in Buenos Aires I'd be able to see him from time to time. Relieved that I had hit upon a sensible solution to the problem, I set out with my mind at ease.

There was an atmospheric little restaurant a few hundred yards from the flat and I decided to go there for my last meal in Uruguay. I ordered some olives to be followed by the usual steak and chips with salad, and a bottle of my favourite health-promoting Argentine Malbec from the glorious province of Mendoza to wash it all down.

It was still early and with no other diners to talk to I finally relaxed and opened my book. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was a very popular novella in the early 1970s and I had been reading the Spanish edition, *Juan Salvador Gaviota*. But, despite my best efforts, I found I could not focus my attention on seagulls at all. I was thinking about a certain penguin in a bath. In all probability he would be dead when I got back. It was a certainty, I thought. The wretched creature must have swallowed significant quantities of oil and would soon die of poisoning. It was inevitable. It just didn't

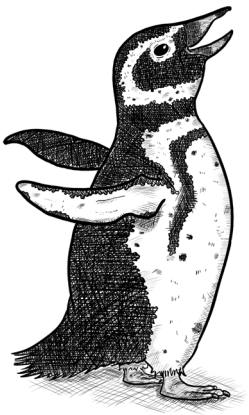
seem possible that one and only one penguin should be able to live through the toxins and trauma that had killed every other bird on that beach. He would be dead in the bath when I got back, I concluded, and all I had done was make his final hours more miserable. I kept looking at the book, but the words just danced on the page in front of me: *Juan Salvador*, *Juan Salvador* . . .

All of a sudden I found I was hoping against hope that the penguin would survive because, as of that instant, he had a name and his name was Juan Salvador Pingüino, and with his name came a surge of hope and the beginning of a bond that would last a lifetime. That was the moment at which he became my penguin, and whatever the future held, we'd face it together.

I ate my meal with undue haste, settled the bill and raced back to the flat, anticipating the worst. But on opening the front door I knew all was well because I could hear him running up and down in the bath and flapping his wings in welcome. As I entered the bathroom he looked at me in his inimitable way:

'*I'm so glad you're back! You've been an awfully long time*,' he seemed to be saying and I found I was smiling at him – or, rather more precisely, I was grinning from ear to ear, relief flooding through me.

'*Yes, Juan Salvador, I'm back, and I'm so glad to see you looking so well!*'



‘Yes, Juan Salvador, I’m back, and I’m so glad to see you looking so well!’