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**The Summer of the Penguins**

**With illustrations by Isabel Pin**

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Mit Illustrationen von Isabel Pin)

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Sample translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

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1.

This story took place in London not too long ago, on a lovely late summer day. It was the so-called *Last Night of the Proms*, that evening when the traditional promenade concert season draws to its end, taking with it that brief time when Londoners feel like Italians, though in a very English manner, of course.

To be precise, the events began earlier in the day, when Mrs. Annetta Robington, a geography teacher from Great Missenden - which, contrary to its name, was actually a very small village - found herself unable to resist the temptation to step into a small bookshop in the lively and enchanting neighborhood of Mayfair, which she was crossing through on her way from the British Museum to Hyde Park. She had underestimated the distances within London. Anyone accustomed to the sidewalks of Great Missenden would find themselves confronted with very different dimensions when in a city like London.

However, this was not solely caused by the hope of achieving a moment's respite in the cool quiet of an obviously neat and cultivated shop. Curiosity, also, came into play. The bookseller seemed to have a natural affinity for Mrs. Robington's interests. Practically every book that he had set out on display could have been found in Mrs. Robington's own little library. Everything from *Darwin's Last Voyage* and *Siberian Summer* to *The Confident Teacher*. A

strangely varied and - as it occurred to Mrs. Robington as she stepped over the threshold - rather ambiguous assortment.

The shop's dim lighting and the sudden stillness that descended once the door with the quiet chimes whooshed shut behind her catalyzed a faint dizziness in the customer, whom we should imagine as a middle-aged woman, whose most energetic years might lie behind her, though the best ones were doubtlessly yet to come. There was no way she could suspect that at this point, though. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the bookseller, who was barely discernible behind the counter and cash register, but who greeted her cheerfully.

Appreciatively, Mrs. Robington inhaled the air tinged with a hint of paper and printer's ink, before detecting a little tickle toward the back of her brain. Had anyone ever made a study of this? Was there a region somewhere near the brainstem that was particularly receptive to the scent of books? With a little sigh, she exhaled and sensed how the pleasant coolness spread across her bare arms. She turned toward the tables and shelves displaying the alluring volumes that a well-read and empathetic bookseller had clearly gathered together for the customers who entered this charming shop. It was possible to extrapolate something about the shop owner's personal preferences based on the selection: for example, a love for Nordic literature and a penchant for early modernist works, as well as culinary books with a focus on various seafood dishes - and an entire bookcase dedicated to the environment of Antarctica, as Mrs. Robington ascertained with a mixture of astonishment and curiosity.

The exhaustion brought on by the long walk through a hot day retreated in the face of the exhilaration that a well-managed bookshop is able to provide at any given moment. Refreshed by the literature's enticing variety, Mrs. Robington settled down on one of the stools to immerse herself in the botany of East African islands, the short stories of Henry James, the memoirs of a Siamese concubine, and lastly, an illustrated coffee-table book full of historic and recent photographs of penguins, which had been taken with an unbelievable eye to detail. She lost track of time and space. Only when the dim interior light seemed to spread outdoors did she suddenly jolt back to herself and take a look at the time. The train to Aylesbury which she had intended to take had departed long ago. The next one would not leave for at least two hours, thanks to the unavoidable railroad workers' strikes. If it actually was able to get through, at all. She cleared her throat, stood up, and smoothed the wrinkles out of her dress. A pile of books sat in front of her. She had sampled parts of them and now gazed at them longingly. There was no way she could take them all with her. Firstly, she did not have enough cash along, and secondly, she had no idea how to transport them all. That was just the way it was. However, she should purchase at least one or two of them, since she had spent so long enjoying the

bookseller's unobtrusive hospitality. After a few moments of mental debate, she carried an airy summer novel about a weekend at Lake Como and a relatively hefty compendium of ancient maps to the counter, and set them down.

"I would like these," she said before stumbling to a stop. "I... I..."

Could it really be? Or was the atmosphere within this bewitching little bookshop playing with a very different part of her mind? Mrs. Robington was not one to believe in elves and trolls. Never had been. Quite the opposite: As a public servant in the United Kingdom, she was sooner a little antagonistic toward the supernatural, and considered herself a dyed-in-the-wool rationalist. The British Empire would never have come to be without the reliability and realism of Englishmen.

And yet: Despite her best efforts, what she saw defied all laws of reality and had to be linked to the fact that the impressive photographs of the residents of Grahamland and the South Shetland Islands had been seared into her retina.

"There are no penguins outside of the South Pole," she whispered, as she closed her eyes for a moment.

When she opened them again, everything would vanish. The mirage would dissolve to reveal a nice old man, whose mildly wrinkled white shirt would be tucked inside a dark tweed jacket and held together by an ill-fitting paisley bowtie.

"That, in reality, is a common misconception," murmured the bookseller, as he reached for the two books in front of him. "These here?"

"What did you say?"

"These books?"

"No, I mean what you said before that: *a common misconception*." Mrs. Robington stared at the bookseller, perplexed.

"A joke, that's all," he clarified.

However, at these words, the delicate feathers in his eyebrows trembled, and his pitch black eyes seemed to furtively avoid her gaze.

"But your plumage," the teacher stuttered, motioning uncertainly at his chest.

"Alfred Twickenham, eighth-generation tailor. Savile Row, Nr. 14."

"And the points of your ears..."

"Haircut by Jenson's. 12 pounds 50 - before tip." The bookseller tapped the books that were still sitting before him. "Are you paying cash?"

"Of course," wheezed Mrs. Annetta Robington, incredulously.

This confident yet dry reaction from the gentleman left no room for suspicions that her mind was playing tricks on her or that she was at the mercy of her own fantasy. She smiled apologetically and handed the penguin a twenty-pound note, waved off the change, and left the shop with mixed feelings.

As the door swung shut behind her, she glanced back once more and caught sight of the old man behind his register. His face seemed to reflect an unusual look of apprehension, a concern that cast a shadow over his forehead and beak.

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2.

Ancient maps invite us to see the world through the eyes of our ancestors. We make the acquaintance of countries, cities, rivers, and seas under various foreign-sounding names. Midpoints, axes and dimensions emerge in a completely different light. Jerusalem is frequently located at the world's naval, while India and the British Isles are comparable in size. Brazil resembles a Spanish fan or, alternatively, a bulging papaya. Mrs. Annetta Robington could lose herself for hours in such historical representations. As her very gentle fingertips glided across the reproduced woodcuts, engravings and lithographs, her lips would silently read the mysterious labels on mountains and valleys, regions, ethnic groups and tribes. And, thus, a late afternoon in the southern climes turned into a British evening. The trees in Hyde Park swallowed the sun and sent the moon up into the still-milky sky, which towered over the lamp posts and gazed quizzically at the visitor from Great Missenden. Unwillingly, a shudder gripped our heroine. How late was it? Six thirty? Seven? With a glance at the watch she had inherited from her mother, she was able to confirm that it was seven thirty. Normally, this would not have been a problem in terms of the Chiltern Railways. However, due to the weeks of strikes, it proved to be too late for her to catch a train back home on this particular day.

Mrs. Robington was not one of those people who spent any time fretting about the things she could not change. If she had lived in ancient times, she would have probably been a Stoic. This was why she had long ago made the decision to teach young people to see the world from this perspective. Since she could not reach Great Missenden anymore tonight, she would, for better or for worse, have to spend the night in London. She shut the map of the Achaemenid Empire in the interest of starting her search for a place to stay, at which juncture, the bookseller came back to mind. More than that: She could practically envision him in his suit from Alfred

Twickenham and his haircut by Jenson's. And yet, should such accoutrements and details make a person look like the spitting image of a penguin? If it had not been for the apprehensive look he had sent after her, Mrs. Annetta Robington probably would have chalked this up to a whim of her overstimulated spirits reacting to the proximity of the books and the enveloping scent of the shop on a warm late summer afternoon on which she had perhaps walked too much and eaten too little. However, the concern had not been for her. No, it was a different kind of worry, something like fear?

As all of this was running through her mind, she found herself once more - not so surprisingly - right in front of the bookshop. The old man was just in the process of wrapping up his day's work. And as he waddled toward the door carrying a seemingly ancient keyring, the geography teacher from the country popped up and hurriedly slipped inside.

"Ma'am, it's been a long day," he said morosely. "I'm very sorry, but we really must close up now."

"Of course, sir," replied Mrs. Robington. "I don't plan to be here long. Just one question."

The old bookseller stopped by the door, dangling the keyring from the end of his wing in a blatant manner.

"They're other places, too, right?" Mrs. Robington said.

"Pardon me?"

"Penguins. Not just at the South Pole." Her eyes flashed, literally cutting right through him. Once something awakened Mrs. Robington's curiosity, she refused to put it to rest until she had figured out the secret.

The old bookseller inhaled sharply, took a cautious look outside through the door, and pulled the troublesome visitor further into the shop, before locking the door and flipping the sign in the window to *Closed*.

"Sit down," he sighed, gesturing toward a stool sitting beside the counter.

"So, I'm right?" Mrs. Robington asked a few moments later, as she sat across from the fascinating creature. "You are a penguin."

"Forget about it, ma'am," the bookseller countered. "It's for the best if you don't give this any more thought."

"But why? I mean... How can this be?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. To be more accurate, he shrugged the part of his body where shoulders should have been: "Well, they live everywhere. Penguins. They've just adapted well. Today you can find penguins in Marrakech, as well as Basel, Melbourne or Toronto."

“But... I mean: *in a bookshop?*”

“Right, not literally everywhere, like you couldn’t expect to meet penguins in a soccer stadium. Or in the manual trades. To be honest, we aren’t all that good a handwork,” explained the old bookseller, waving his flippers a little apologetically. “Spheniscidae, as you must know, are highly intelligent, like all other predators...”

“Predators?” Mrs. Robington’s concerned look made the bookseller chuckle despite his worries.