

How Pingwill Was Routed

by H.G. Wells

from a scan of [*The Hartford Herald, August 21, 1895*](#)

Pingwill was a nuisance. He married a respectable young woman of mature years and lives on her sufficiency, and he goes about pretending to be a literary character on the strength of an edition of a classic, an examination success at some university place or other, and occasional reviewing. He likes to talk about books and is offensively familiar with all the masterpieces and most of the rest of English literature. He considers gabble about books intellectual conversation. He regards a quiet man smoking in a chair as fair game for his scraps of quotation—which he is as eager to void as he is greedy to acquire—and he cannot understand that people who write books never read them and are full of bitter memories of their own adventures in authorship. He wears a pince nez, and Mrs. Pingwill, when present, echoes all his quavering severities with the explanation that “George is so satirical.” He is exasperatingly reliable in the matter of names and dates, and at first, perhaps, we made the mistake of encouraging Pingwill.

Heydinger was the chief encourager of Pingwill. He is a humorist, a kind of person who sees jokes in things that rouse the passions of ordinary people, and he found an unaccountable pleasure in developing one particular aspect of the Pingwill constitution. No retired port butcher's lady, no wife of a village rector who has married beneath him, could be more punctilious of her intimacy than Pingwill among his authors. And Pingwill was just as intensely sensitive to the breath of scandal, which in matters literary is called criticism. No one could be thicker with a really chic author; no one readier to "cut" the writer who fell under the shadow of adverse comment.

He was, in fact, a literary snob—a by no means rare variety—and he had an almost passionate dread of admiring the wrong man. He took reviews in the weeklies quite seriously. Naturally he had nothing but serene contempt for Dickens and Jerome and Mark Twain, and "people of that stamp." And Heydinger never tired of drawing him out upon Kipling. In a careless moment he had informed us that Kipling's style was rough and unfinished—it seems he tried for once to form a judgment for himself and had happened upon really quite vulgar and coarse expressions. After he had learned better from a review, the mere name filled him with uncomfortable memories. It was as if the rector's wife had cut the duchess by mistake. Horrible! Then he was privately in great trouble about Besant and Hall Caine. "Ought I to know them?" was the attitude. The oracles differed. He was deliciously guarded upon these authors under Heydinger's most searching questions, but his face flushed guiltily. Le Gallienne, Zangwill, and most of the younger me, who have warm friends and animated critics, bothered him more or less, and he had a horrible dread. I know, that Ruskin, whom he had committed himself to admire, was not quite all that he should be. "One has to be so very particular," was Pingwill's attitude.

However, after awhile we tired of this creature's odd way with books, and his proximity then became, as I say, a nuisance. But Heydinger, who had formed an adequate conception of his character, suggested the remedy, and together we routed him. Both Heydinger and I had got through a morning's work, and in he came, fresh and freshly primed. He dropped into a chair and emitted some indifferent remarks.

"I have heard," he said, "that these delicious child sketches of Kenneth Graham's are out in a book by themselves."

"Read 'em?" said Heydinger brutally.

"No—hardly—yet," said Pingwill, "but they're good, aren't they?"

"Very," said I, "but that's no reason why you should go about calling them delicious before you have read them."

"Perhaps not," said Pingwill. "Perhaps not."

"They remind me very much of Wendle Hooper," said Heydinger. "You know him, Bellows?"

"Intimately," I said. "I have one of his first editions at home."

"You will be reminded very much of Wendle Hooper," said Heydinger, turning to Pingwill.

"Indeed!" said Pingwill, stepping into the trap.

"The same subtle suggestiveness of phrase," said Heydinger. "The same delicate yet penetrating sympathy."

"I must certainly read them," said Pingwill, evidently searching his mind for the name of Wendle Hooper and flushing slightly.

"I know of no man," said Heydinger, "except perhaps Lant who comes so near to Hooper as Graham. You know Lant's style, Pingwill?"

Pingwill flushed a little deeper, and his ears grew pink. “I can’t say,” said he, “that I’ve read” —

“He’s not so well known as Hooper,” I admitted. “He was in the little set that clustered round Leigh Hunt” —

Pingwill suddenly felt hotter again. “I think Leigh Hunt” — he began, evidently ready with a fragment of textbook.

“He borrowed from Lant,” interrupted Heydinger. “Certainly he borrowed from Lant. That essay on the chimney pot hat” —

“Pure Lant,” I said.

“I’ve neglected Lant a little, I am afraid,” mumbled Pingwill, horribly bothered by this unknown name.

“You should read him,” said I. “He’s a perfect mine of good things. That passage in Browning, for instance. You were pointing out the resemblance only this morning, Heydinger.”

“About the chattering disks,” said Heydinger. “You remember that, Pingwill?”

“I think so,” said Pingwill. “Chattering disks. I seem to recollect. How does it go?”

“The chattering disks go reeling,” said Heydinger, inventing boldly. “You must remember.”

Pingwill now was really very uncomfortable. But he was having a lively lesson in priggish conversation. “I wish I had my Lant here,” said I.

“You surely remember about the chattering disks?” said Heydinger, turning as he pretended to search for a book on the shelf.

“The phrase is quite familiar to me,” said Pingwill, “but for the life of me I can’t recall the context! It’s queer what tricks one’s memory plays.”

Heydinger quietly resumed his seat.

“Have you written anything lately?” said Pingwill to change the subject.

“Yes,” said Heydinger, and seeing some further question threatened, added, as if in explanation, “Alvarados.”

It pulled Pingwill up abruptly. “Alvarados! Ah!” he repeated after Heydinger, with an air of comprehension. If he understood, he was certainly wider than I. His ears were now bright red. We remained tranquil, watching him. It was not my affair.

He returned to conversation presently with an air of having found and grasped the thing firmly. “Will you make them into a book?” he said bravely. A just perceptible dew was on his face. Heydinger evidently expected as much. “Them!” he answered. “What?”

“Well—it. Alvarados.”

“It!” said Heydinger, raising his eyebrows. “I don’t know,” he said and became silent. Pingwill was evidently baffled. Very awkwardly, and after a pause, he said he hoped that would be the case. Heydinger thanked him dryly. There was an interval while we watched one another. Then he discovered his pipe was out—it always is—and asked me for the matches. He talked incoherently upon indifferent topics for a few minutes after that, and all the time I could see the trouble in his eyes, the awful doubt of his own omniscience that had arisen. Alvarados? Presently he rose to go. Routed.

As he went out I heard him whisper to himself very softly, “Alvarados!”

He has not been near us since. I can imagine the dismal times he has had hunting through Rabelais, Gil Blas, Hudibras, the Dictionary of Phrase and Fable for Alvarados, going through the British museum catalogue for Wendle Hooper and hunting all Browning for the “Chattering Disks,” feeling most horribly ashamed of himself all the time. I like to think of his flush of shame, the

overthrow of his frail apparatus of knowledge, and ever and again Heydinger and I break the friendly silences which constitute our intercourse by saying casually, "Pingwill seems to be dropping us altogether," or, "Don't seem to see so much of Pingwill as we used to do, Bellows." Such reflections are the olives of life.

—H.G. Wells, in *New Budget*

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