

WIGGIN KATE SMITH

PENELOPE'S ENGLISH
EXPERIENCES

Kate Wiggin

Penelope's English Experiences

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Kate Douglas Wiggin

Penelope's English Experiences / Being

Extracts from the Commonplace

Book of Penelope Hamilton

Part First—In Town

Chapter I. The weekly bill

Smith's Hotel,
10 Dovermarle Street.

Here we are in London again,—Francesca, Salemina, and I. Salemina is a philanthropist of the Boston philanthropists limited. I am an artist. Francesca is— It is very difficult to label Francesca. She is, at her present stage of development, just a nice girl; that is about all: the sense of humanity hasn't dawned upon her yet; she is even unaware that personal responsibility for the universe has come into vogue, and so she is happy.

Francesca is short of twenty years old, Salemina short of forty, I short of thirty. Francesca is in love, Salemina never has been in love, I never shall be in love. Francesca is rich, Salemina is well-to-do, I am poor. There we are in a nutshell.

We are not only in London again, but we are again in Smith's private hotel; one of those deliciously comfortable and ensnaring hostelries in Mayfair which one enters as a solvent human being, and which one leaves as a bankrupt, no matter what may be the number of ciphers on one's letter of credit; since the greater one's apparent supply of wealth, the greater the demand made upon it. I never stop long in London without determining to give up my art for a private hotel. There must be millions in it, but I fear I lack some of the essential qualifications for success. I never could have the heart, for example, to charge a struggling young genius eight shillings a week for two candles, and then eight shillings the next week for the same two candles, which the struggling young genius, by dint of vigorous economy, had managed to preserve to a decent height. No, I could never do it, not even if I were certain that she would squander the sixteen shillings in Bond Street fripperies instead of laying them up against the rainy day.

It is Salemina who always unsnarls the weekly bill. Francesca spends an evening or two with it, first of all, because, since she is so young, we think it good mental-training for her, and not that she ever accomplishes any results worth mentioning. She begins by making three columns headed respectively F., S., and P. These initials stand for Francesca, Salemina, and Penelope, but they resemble the signs for pounds, shillings, and pence so perilously that they introduce an added distraction.

She then places in each column the items in which we are all equal, such as rooms, attendance, fires, and lights. Then come the extras, which are different for each person: more ale for one, more hot baths for another; more carriages for one, more lemon squashes for another. Francesca's column is principally filled with carriages and lemon squashes. You would fancy her whole time was spent in driving and drinking, if you judged her merely by this weekly statement at the hotel.

When she has reached the point of dividing the whole bill into three parts, so that each person may know what is her share, she adds the three together, expecting, not unnaturally, to get the total

amount of the bill. Not at all. She never comes within thirty shillings of the desired amount, and she is often three or four guineas to the good or to the bad. One of her difficulties lies in her inability to remember that in English money it makes a difference where you place a figure, whether, in the pound, shilling, or pence column. Having been educated on the theory that a six is a six the world over, she charged me with sixty shillings' worth of Apollinaris in one week. I pounced on the error, and found that she had jotted down each pint in the shilling instead of in the pence column.

After Francesca had broken ground on the bill in this way, Salemina, on the next leisure evening, draws a large armchair under the lamp and puts on her eye-glasses. We perch on either arm, and, after identifying our own extras, we summon the butler to identify his. There are a good many that belong to him or to the landlady; of that fact we are always convinced before he proves to the contrary. We can never see (until he makes us see) why the breakfasts on the 8th should be four shillings each because we had strawberries, if on the 8th we find strawberries charged in the luncheon column and also in the column of desserts and ices. And then there are the peripatetic lemon squashes. Dawson calls them 'still' lemon squashes because they are made with water, not with soda or seltzer or vichy, but they are particularly badly named. 'Still' forsooth! when one of them will leap from place to place, appearing now in the column of mineral waters and now in the spirits, now in the suppers, and again in the sundries. We might as well drink Chablis or Pommery by the time one of these still squashes has ceased wandering, and charging itself at each station. The force of Dawson's intellect is such that he makes all this moral turbidity as clear as crystal while he remains in evidence. His bodily presence has a kind of illuminating power, and all the errors that we fancy we have found he traces to their original source, which is always in our suspicious and inexperienced minds. As he leaves the room he points out some proof of unexampled magnanimity on the part of the hotel; as, for instance, the fact that the management has not charged a penny for sending up Miss Monroe's breakfast trays. Francesca impulsively presses two shillings into his honest hand and remembers afterwards that only one breakfast was served in our bedrooms during that particular week, and that it was mine, not hers.

The Paid Out column is another source of great anxiety. Francesca is a person who is always buying things unexpectedly and sending them home C.O.D.; always taking a cab and having it paid at the house; always sending telegrams and messages by hansom, and notes by the Boots.

I should think, were England on the brink of a war, that the Prime Minister might expect in his office something of the same hubbub, uproar, and excitement that Francesca manages to evolve in this private hotel. Naturally she cannot remember her expenditures, or extravagances, or complications of movement for a period of seven days; and when she attacks the Paid Out column she exclaims in a frenzy, 'Just look at this! On the 11th they say they paid out three shillings in telegrams, and I was at Maidenhead!' Then because we love her and cannot bear to see her charming forehead wrinkled, we approach from our respective corners, and the conversation is something like this:—

Salemina. "You were not at Maidenhead on the 11th, Francesca; it was the 12th."

Francesca. "Oh! so it was; but I sent no telegrams on the 11th."

Penelope. "Wasn't that the day you wired Mr. Drayton that you couldn't go to the Zoo?"

Francesca. "Oh yes, so I did: and to Mr. Godolphin that I could. I remember now; but that's only two."

Salemina. "How about the hairdresser whom you stopped coming from Kensington?"

Francesca. "Yes, she's the third, that's all right then; but what in the world is this twelve shillings?"

Penelope. "The foolish amber beads you were persuaded into buying in the Burlington Arcade?"

Francesca. "No, those were seven shillings, and they are splitting already."

Salemina. "Those soaps and sachets you bought on the way home the day that you left your purse in the cab?"

Francesca. "No; they were only five shillings. Oh, perhaps they lumped the two things; if seven and five are twelve, then that is just what they did. (Here she takes a pencil.) Yes, they are twelve,

so that's right; what a comfort! Now here's two and six on the 13th. That was yesterday, and I can always remember yesterdays; they are my strong point. I didn't spend a penny yesterday; oh yes! I did pay half a crown for a potted plant, but it was not two and six, and it was a half-crown because it was the first time I had seen one and I took particular notice. I'll speak to Dawson about it, but it will make no difference. Nobody but an expert English accountant could find a flaw in one of these bills and prove his case."

By this time we have agreed that the weekly bill as a whole is substantially correct, and all that Salemina has to do is to estimate our several shares in it; so Francesca and I say good night and leave her toiling like Cicero in his retirement at Tusculum. By midnight she has generally brought the account to a point where a half-hour's fresh attention in the early morning will finish it. Not that she makes it come out right to a penny. She has been treasurer of the Boston Band of Benevolence, of the Saturday Morning Sloyd Circle, of the Club for the Reception of Russian Refugees, and of the Society for the Brooding of Buddhism; but none of these organisations carries on its existence by means of pounds, shillings, and pence, or Salemina's resignation would have been requested long ago. However, we are not disposed to be captious; we are too glad to get rid of the bill. If our united thirds make four or five shillings in excess, we divide them equally; if it comes the other way about, we make it up in the same manner; always meeting the sneers of masculine critics with Dr. Holmes's remark that a faculty for numbers is a sort of detached-lever arrangement that can be put into a mighty poor watch.

Chapter II. The powdered footman smiles

Salemina is so English! I can't think how she manages. She had not been an hour on British soil before she asked a servant to fetch in some coals and mend the fire; she followed this Anglicism by a request for a grilled chop, 'a grilled, chump chop, waiter, please,' and so on from triumph to triumph. She now discourses of methylated spirits as if she had never in her life heard of alcohol, and all the English equivalents for Americanisms are ready for use on the tip of her tongue. She says 'conserv't'ry' and 'observ't'ry'; she calls the chambermaid 'Mairy,' which is infinitely softer, to be sure, than the American 'Mary,' with its over-long a; she ejaculates 'Quite so!' in all the pauses of conversation, and talks of smoke-rooms, and camisoles, and luggage-vans, and slip-bodies, and trams, and mangling, and goffering. She also eats jam for breakfast as if she had been reared on it, when every one knows that the average American has to contract the jam habit by patient and continuous practice.

This instantaneous assimilation of English customs does not seem to be affectation on Salemina's part; nor will I wrong her by fancying that she went through a course of training before she left Boston. From the moment she landed you could see that her foot was on her native heath. She inhaled the fog with a sense of intoxication that the east winds of New England had never given her, and a great throb of patriotism swelled in her breast when she first met the Princess of Wales in Hyde Park.

As for me, I get on charmingly with the English nobility and sufficiently well with the gentry, but the upper servants strike terror to my soul. There is something awe-inspiring to me about an English butler. If they would only put him in livery, or make him wear a silver badge; anything, in short, to temper his pride and prevent one from mistaking him for the master of the house or the bishop within his gates. When I call upon Lady DeWolfe, I say to myself impressively, as I go up the steps: 'You are as good as a butler, as well born and well bred as a butler, even more intelligent than a butler. Now, simply because he has an unapproachable haughtiness of demeanour, which you can respectfully admire, but can never hope to imitate, do not cower beneath the polar light of his eye; assert yourself; be a woman; be an American citizen!' All in vain. The moment the door opens I ask for Lady DeWolfe in so timid a tone that I know Parker thinks me the parlour-maid's sister who has rung the visitors' bell by mistake. If my lady is within, I follow Parker to the drawing-room, my knees shaking under me at the prospect of committing some solecism in his sight. Lady DeWolfe's husband has been noble only four months, and Parker of course knows it, and perhaps affects even greater hauteur to divert the attention of the vulgar commoner from the newness of the title.

Dawson, our butler at Smith's private hotel, wields the same blighting influence on our spirits, accustomed to the soft solicitations of the negro waiter or the comfortable indifference of the free-born American. We never indulge in ordinary democratic or frivolous conversation when Dawson is serving us at dinner. We 'talk up' to him so far as we are able, and before we utter any remark we inquire mentally whether he is likely to think it good form. Accordingly, I maintain throughout dinner a lofty height of aristocratic elegance that impresses even the impassive Dawson, towards whom it is solely directed. To the amazement and amusement of Salemina (who always takes my cheerful inanities at their face value), I give an hypothetical account of my afternoon engagements, interlarding it so thickly with countesses and marchionesses and lords and honourables that though Dawson has passed soup to duchesses, and scarcely ever handed a plate to anything less than a baroness, he dilutes the customary scorn of his glance, and makes it two parts condescending approval as it rests on me, Penelope Hamilton, of the great American working class (unlimited).

Apropos of the servants, it seems to me that the British footman has relaxed a trifle since we were last here; or is it possible that he reaches the height of his immobility at the height of the London season, and as it declines does he decline and become flesh? At all events, I have twice seen a footman change his weight from one leg to the other, as he stood at a shop entrance with his lady's mantle over

his arm; twice have I seen one stroke his chin, and several times have I observed others, during the month of July, conduct themselves in many respects like animate objects with vital organs. Lest this incendiary statement be challenged, levelled as it is at an institution whose stability and order are but feebly represented by the eternal march of the stars in their courses, I hasten to explain that in none of these cases cited was it a powdered footman who (to use a Delsartean expression) withdrew will from his body and devitalised it before the public eye. I have observed that the powdered personage has much greater control over his muscles than the ordinary footman with human hair, and is infinitely his superior in rigidity. Dawson tells me confidentially that if a footman smiles there is little chance of his rising in the world. He says a sense of humour is absolutely fatal in that calling, and that he has discharged many a good footman because of an intelligent and expressive face.

I tremble to think of what the powdered footman may become when he unbends in the bosom of the family. When, in the privacy of his own apartments, the powder is washed off, the canary-seed pads removed from his aristocratic calves, and his scarlet and buff magnificence exchanged for a simple negligé, I should think he might be guilty of almost any indiscretion or violence. I for one would never consent to be the wife and children of a powdered footman, and receive him in his moments of reaction.

Chapter III. Eggs a la coque

Is it to my credit, or to my eternal dishonour that I once made a powdered footman smile, and that, too, when he was handing a buttered muffin to an earl's daughter?

It was while we were paying a visit at Marjorimallow Hall, Sir Owen and Lady Marjorimallow's place in Surrey. This was to be our first appearance in an English country house, and we made elaborate preparations. Only our freshest toilettes were packed, and these were arranged in our trunks with the sole view of impressing the lady's-maid who should unpack them. We each purchased dressing-cases and new fittings, Francesca's being of sterling silver, Salemina's of triple plate, and mine of celluloid, as befitted our several fortunes. Salemina read up on English politics; Francesca practised a new way of dressing her hair; and I made up a portfolio of sketches. We counted, therefore, on representing American letters, beauty, and art to that portion of the great English public staying at Marjorimallow Hall. (I must interject a parenthesis here to the effect that matters did not move precisely as we expected; for at table, where most of our time was passed, Francesca had for a neighbour a scientist, who asked her plump whether the religion of the American Indian was or was not a pure theism; Salemina's partner objected to the word 'politics' in the mouth of a woman; while my attendant squire adored a good bright-coloured chromo. But this is anticipating.)

Three days before our departure, I remarked at the breakfast-table, Dawson being absent: "My dear girls, you are aware that we have ordered fried eggs, scrambled eggs, buttered eggs, and poached eggs ever since we came to Dovermarle Street, simply because we do not know how to eat boiled eggs prettily from the shell, English fashion, and cannot break them into a cup or a glass, American fashion, on account of the effect upon Dawson. Now there will certainly be boiled eggs at Marjorimallow Hall, and we cannot refuse them morning after morning; it will be cowardly (which is unpleasant), and it will be remarked (which is worse). Eating them minced in an egg-cup, in a baronial hall, with the remains of a drawbridge in the grounds, is equally impossible; if we do that, Lady Marjorimallow will be having our luggage examined, to see if we carry wigwams and war-whoops about with us. No, it is clearly necessary that we master the gentle art of eating eggs tidily and daintily from the shell. I have seen English women—very dull ones, too—do it without apparent effort; I have even seen an English infant do it, and that without soiling her apron, or, as Salemina would say, 'messing her pinafore.' I propose, therefore, that we order soft-boiled eggs daily; that we send Dawson from the room directly breakfast is served; and that then and there we have a class for opening eggs, lowest grade, object method. Any person who cuts the shell badly, or permits the egg to leak over the rim, or allows yellow dabs on the plate, or upsets the cup, or stains her fingers, shall be fined 'tuppence' and locked into her bedroom for five minutes."

The first morning we were all in the bedroom together, and, there being no blameless person to collect fines, the wildest civil disorder prevailed.

On the second day Salemina and I improved slightly, but Francesca had passed a sleepless night, and her hand trembled (the love-letter mail had come in from America). We were obliged to tell her, as we collected 'tuppence' twice on the same egg, that she must either remain at home, or take an oilcloth pinafore to Marjorimallow Hall.

But 'ease is the lovely result of forgotten toil,' and it is only a question of time and desire with Americans, we are so clever. Other nations have to be trained from birth; but as we need only an ounce of training where they need a pound, we can afford to procrastinate. Sometimes we procrastinate too long, but that is a trifle. On the third morning success crowned our efforts. Salemina smiled, and I told an anecdote, during the operation, although my egg was cracked in the boiling, and I question if the Queen's favourite maid-of-honour could have managed it prettily. Accordingly, when eggs were brought to the breakfast-table at Marjorimallow Hall, we were only slightly nervous. Francesca was at the far end of the long table, and I do not know how she fared, but from various Anglicisms that

Salemina dropped, as she chatted with the Queen's Counsel on her left, I could see that her nerve was steady and circulation free. We exchanged glances (there was the mistake!), and with an embarrassed laugh she struck her egg a hasty blow.

Her egg-cup slipped and lurched; a top fraction of the egg flew in the direction of the Q.C., and the remaining portion oozed, in yellow confusion, rapidly into her plate. Alas for that past mistress of elegant dignity, Salemina! If I had been at Her Majesty's table, I should have smiled, even if I had gone to the Tower the next moment; but as it was, I became hysterical. My neighbour, a portly member of Parliament, looked amazed, Salemina grew scarlet, the situation was charged with danger; and, rapidly viewing the various exits, I chose the humorous one, and told as picturesquely as possible the whole story of our school of egg-opening in Dovermarle Street, the highly arduous and encouraging rehearsals conducted there, and the stupendous failure incident to our first public appearance. Sir Owen led the good-natured laughter and applause; lords and ladies, Q.C.'s and M.P.'s joined in with a will; poor Salemina raised her drooping head, opened and ate a second egg with the repose of a Vere de Vere—and the footman smiled!

Chapter IV. The English sense of humour

I do not see why we hear that the Englishman is deficient in a sense of humour. His jokes may not be a matter of daily food to him, as they are to the American; he may not love whimsicality with the same passion, nor inhale the aroma of a witticism with as keen a relish; but he likes fun whenever he sees it, and he sees it as often as most people. It may be that we find the Englishman more receptive to our bits of feminine nonsense just now, simply because this is the day of the American woman in London, and, having been assured that she is an entertaining personage, young John Bull is willing to take it for granted so long as she does not try to marry him, and even this pleasure he will allow her on occasion,—if well paid for it.

The longer I live, the more I feel it an absurdity to label nations with national traits, and then endeavour to make individuals conform to the required standard. It is possible, I suppose, to draw certain broad distinctions, though even these are subject to change; but the habit of generalising from one particular, that mainstay of the cheap and obvious essayist, has rooted many fictions in the public mind. Nothing, for instance, can blot from my memory the profound, searching, and exhaustive analysis of a great nation which I learned in my small geography when I was a child, namely, ‘The French are a gay and polite people, fond of dancing and light wines.’

One young Englishman whom I have met lately errs on the side of over-appreciation. He laughs before, during, and after every remark I make, unless it be a simple request for food or drink. This is an acquaintance of Willie Beresford, the Honourable Arthur Ponsonby, who was the ‘whip’ on our coach drive to Dorking,—dear, delightful, adorable Dorking, of hen celebrity.

Salemina insisted on my taking the box seat, in the hope that the Honourable Arthur would amuse me. She little knew him! He sapped me of all my ideas, and gave me none in exchange. Anything so unspeakably heavy I never encountered. It is very difficult for a woman who doesn’t know a nigh horse from an off one, nor the wheelers from the headers (or is it the fronters?), to find subjects of conversation with a gentleman who spends three-fourths of his existence on a coach. It was the more difficult for me because I could not decide whether Willie Beresford was cross because I was devoting myself to the whip, or because Francesca had remained at home with a headache. This state of affairs continued for about fifteen miles, when it suddenly dawned upon the Honourable Arthur that, however mistaken my speech and manner, I was trying to be agreeable. This conception acted on the honest and amiable soul like magic. I gradually became comprehensible, and finally he gave himself up to the theory that, though eccentric, I was harmless and amusing, so we got on famously,—so famously that Willie Beresford grew ridiculously gloomy, and I decided that it could not be Francesca’s headache.

The names of these English streets are a never-failing source of delight to me. In that one morning we drove past Pie, Pudding, and Petticoat Lanes, and later on we found ourselves in a ‘Prudent Passage,’ which opened, very inappropriately, into ‘Huggin Lane.’ Willie Beresford said it was the first time he had ever heard of anything so disagreeable as prudence terminating in anything so agreeable as huggin’. When he had been severely reprimanded by his mother for this shocking speech, I said to the Honourable Arthur:—

“I don’t understand your business signs in England,—this ‘Company, Limited,’ and that ‘Company, Limited.’ That one, of course, is quite plain” (pointing to the front of a building on the village street), “‘Goat’s Milk Company, Limited’; I suppose they have but one or two goats, and necessarily the milk must be Limited.”

Salemina says that this was not in the least funny, that it was absolutely flat; but it had quite the opposite effect upon the Honourable Arthur. He had no command over himself or his horses for some minutes; and at intervals during the afternoon the full felicity of the idea would steal upon him, and the smile of reminiscence would flit across his ruddy face.

The next day, at the Eton and Harrow games at Lord's cricket-ground, he presented three flowers of British aristocracy to our party, and asked me each time to tell the goat-story, which he had previously told himself, and probably murdered in the telling. Not content with this arrant flattery, he begged to be allowed to recount some of my international episodes to a literary friend who writes for Punch. I demurred decidedly, but Salemina said that perhaps I ought to be willing to lower myself a trifle for the sake of elevating Punch! This home-thrust so delighted the Honourable Arthur that it remained his favourite joke for days, and the overworked goat was permitted to enjoy that oblivion from which Salemina insists it should never have emerged.

Chapter V. A Hyde Park Sunday

The Honourable Arthur, Salemina, and I took a stroll in Hyde Park one Sunday afternoon, not for the purpose of joining the fashionable throng of 'pretty people' at Stanhope Gate, but to mingle with the common herd in its special precincts,—precincts not set apart, indeed, by any legal formula, but by a natural law of classification which seems to be inherent in the universe. It was a curious and motley crowd—a little dull, perhaps, but orderly, well-behaved, and self-respecting, with here and there part of the flotsam and jetsam of a great city, a ragged, sodden, hopeless wretch wending his way about with the rest, thankful for any diversion.

Under the trees, each in the centre of his group, large or small according to his magnetism and eloquence, stood the park 'shouter,' airing his special grievance, playing his special part, preaching his special creed, pleading his special cause,—anything, probably, for the sake of shouting. We were plainly dressed, and did not attract observation as we joined the outside circle of one of these groups after another. It was as interesting to watch the listeners as the speakers. I wished I might paint the sea of faces, eager, anxious, stolid, attentive, happy, and unhappy: histories written on many of them; others blank, unmarked by any thought or aspiration. I stole a sidelong look at the Honourable Arthur. He is an Englishman first, and a man afterwards (I prefer it the other way), but he does not realise it; he thinks he is just like all other good fellows, although he is mistaken. He and Willie Beresford speak the same language, but they are as different as Malay and Eskimo. He is an extreme type, but he is very likeable and very well worth looking at, with his long coat, his silk hat, and the white Malmaison in his buttonhole. He is always so radiantly, fascinatingly clean, the Honourable Arthur, simple, frank, direct, sensible, and he bores me almost to tears.

The first orator was edifying his hearers with an explanation of the drama of *The Corsican Brothers*, and his eloquence, unlike that of the other speakers, was largely inspired by the hope of pennies. It was a novel idea, and his interpretation was rendered very amusing to us by the wholly original Yorkshire accent which he gave to the French personages and places in the play.

An Irishman in black clerical garb held the next group together. He was in some trouble, owing to a pig-headed and quarrelsome Scotchman in the front rank, who objected to each statement that fell from his lips, thus interfering seriously with the effect of his peroration. If the Irishman had been more convincing, I suppose the crowd would have silenced the scoffer, for these little matters of discipline are always attended to by the audience; but the Scotchman's points were too well taken; he was so trenchant, in fact, at times, that a voice would cry, 'Coom up, Sandy, an' 'ave it all your own w'y, boy!' The discussion continued as long as we were within hearing distance, for the Irishman, though amiable and ignorant, was firm, the 'unconquered Scot' was on his native heath of argument, and the listeners were willing to give them both a hearing.

Under the next tree a fluent Cockney lad of sixteen or eighteen years was declaiming his bitter experiences with the Salvation Army. He had been sheltered in one of its beds which was not to his taste, and it had found employment for him which he had to walk twenty-two miles to get, and which was not to his liking when he did get it. A meeting of the Salvation Army at a little distance rendered his speech more interesting, as its points were repeated and denied as fast as made.

Of course there were religious groups and temperance groups, and groups devoted to the tearing down or raising up of most things except the Government; for on that day there were no Anarchist or Socialist shouters, as is ordinarily the case.

As we strolled down one of the broad roads under the shade of the noble trees, we saw the sun setting in a red-gold haze; a glory of vivid colour made indescribably tender and opalescent by the kind of luminous mist that veils it; a wholly English sunset, and an altogether lovely one. And quite away from the other knots of people, there leaned against a bit of wire fence a poor old man surrounded by half a dozen children and one tired woman with a nursing baby. He had a tattered

book, which seemed to be the story of the Gospels, and his little flock sat on the greensward at his feet as he read. It may be that he, too, had been a shouter in his lustier manhood, and had held a larger audience together by the power of his belief; but now he was helpless to attract any but the children. Whether it was the pathos of his white hairs, his garb of shreds and patches, or the mild benignity of his eye that moved me, I know not, but among all the Sunday shouters in Hyde Park it seemed to me that that quavering voice of the past spoke with the truest note.

Chapter VI. The English Park Lover

The English Park Lover, loving his love on a green bench in Kensington Gardens or Regent's Park, or indeed in any spot where there is a green bench, so long as it is within full view of the passer-by,—this English public lover, male or female, is a most interesting study, for we have not his exact counterpart in America. He is thoroughly respectable, I should think, my urban Colin. He does not have the air of a gay deceiver roving from flower to flower, stealing honey as he goes; he looks, on the contrary, as if it were his intention to lead Phoebe to the altar on the next bank holiday; there is a dead calm in his actions which bespeaks no other course. If Colin were a Don Juan, surely he would be a trifle more ardent, for there is no tropical fervour in his matter-of-fact caresses. He does not embrace Phoebe in the park, apparently, because he adores her to madness; because her smile is like fire in his veins, melting down all his defences; because the intoxication of her nearness is irresistible; because, in fine, he cannot wait until he finds a more secluded spot: nay, verily, he embraces her because—tell me, infatuated fruiterers, poulterers, soldiers, haberdashers (limited), what is your reason? For it does not appear to the casual eye. Stormy weather does not vex the calm of the Park Lover, for 'the rains of Marly do not wet' when one is in love. By a clever manipulation of four arms and four hands they can manage an umbrella and enfold each other at the same time, though a feminine macintosh is well known to be ill adapted to the purpose, and a continuous drizzle would dampen almost any other lover in the universe.

The park embrace, as nearly as I can analyse it, seems to be one part instinct, one part duty, one part custom, and one part reflex action. I have purposely omitted pleasure (which, in the analysis of the ordinary embrace, reduces all the other ingredients to an almost invisible faction), because I fail to find it; but I am willing to believe that in some rudimentary form it does exist, because man attends to no purely unpleasant matter with such praiseworthy assiduity. Anything more fixedly stolid than the Park Lover when he passes his arm round his chosen one and takes her crimson hand in his, I have never seen; unless, indeed, it be the fixed stolidity of the chosen one herself. I had not at first the assurance even to glance at them as I passed by, blushing myself to the roots of my hair, though the offenders themselves never changed colour. Many a time have I walked out of my way or lowered my parasol, for fear of invading their Sunday Eden; but a spirit of inquiry awoke in me at last, and I began to make psychological investigations, with a view to finding out at what point embarrassment would appear in the Park Lover. I experimented (it was a most arduous and unpleasant task) with upwards of two hundred couples, and it is interesting to record that self-consciousness was not apparent in a single instance. It was not merely that they failed to resent my stopping in the path directly opposite them, or my glaring most offensively at them, nor that they even allowed me to sit upon their green bench and witness their chaste salutes, but it was that they did fail to perceive me at all! There is a kind of superb finish and completeness about their indifference to the public gaze which removes it from ordinary immodesty, and gives it a certain scientific value.

Chapter VII. A ducal tea-party

Among all my English experiences, none occupies so important a place as my forced meeting with the Duke of Cimicifugas. (There can be no harm in my telling the incident, so long as I do not give the right names, which are very well known to fame.) The Duchess of Cimicifugas, who is charming, unaffected, and lovable, so report says, has among her chosen friends an untitled woman whom we will call Mrs. Apis Mellifica. I met her only daughter, Hilda, in America, and we became quite intimate. It seems that Mrs. Apis Mellifica, who has an income of 20,000 pounds a year, often exchanges presents with the duchess, and at this time she had brought with her from the Continent some rare old tapestries with which to adorn a new morning-room at Cimicifugas House. These tapestries were to be hung during the absence of the duchess in Homburg, and were to greet her as a birthday surprise on her return. Hilda Mellifica, who is one of the most talented amateur artists in London, and who has exquisite taste in all matters of decoration, was to go down to the ducal residence to inspect the work, and she obtained permission from Lady Veratrum (the confidential companion of the duchess) to bring me with her. I started on this journey to the country with all possible delight, little surmising the agonies that lay in store for me in the mercifully hidden future.

The tapestries were perfect, and Lady Veratrum was most amiable and affable, though the blue blood of the Belladonnas courses in her veins, and her great-grandfather was the celebrated Earl of Rhus Tox, who rendered such notable service to his sovereign. We roamed through the splendid apartments, inspected the superb picture-gallery, where scores of dead-and-gone Cimicifugas (most of them very plain) were glorified by the art of Van Dyck, Sir Joshua, or Gainsborough, and admired the priceless collections of marbles and cameos and bronzes. It was about four o'clock when we were conducted to a magnificent apartment for a brief rest, as we were to return to London at half-past six. As Lady Veratrum left us, she remarked casually, 'His Grace will join us at tea.'

The door closed, and at the same moment I fell upon the brocaded satin state bed and tore off my hat and gloves like one distraught.

"Hilda," I gasped, "you brought me here, and you must rescue me, for I absolutely decline to drink tea with a duke."

"Nonsense, Penelope, don't be absurd," she replied. "I have never happened to see him myself, and I am a trifle nervous, but it cannot be very terrible, I should think."

"Not to you, perhaps, but to me impossible," I said. "I thought he was in Homburg, or I would never have entered this place. It is not that I fear nobility. I could meet Her Majesty the Queen at the Court of St. James without the slightest flutter of embarrassment, because I know I could trust her not to presume on my defencelessness to enter into conversation with me. But this duke, whose dukedom very likely dates back to the hour of the Norman Conquest, is a very different person, and is to be met under very different circumstances. He may ask me my politics. Of course I can tell him that I am a Mugwump, but what if he asks me why I am a Mugwump?"

"He will not," Hilda answered. "Englishmen are not wholly devoid of feeling!"

"And how shall I address him?" I went on. "Does one call him 'your Grace,' or 'your Royal Highness'? Oh for a thousandth-part of the unblushing impertinence of that countrywoman of mine who called your future king 'Tummy'! but she was a beauty, and I am not pretty enough to be anything but discreetly well-mannered. Shall you sit in his presence, or stand and grovel alternately? Does one have to curtsy? Very well, then, make any excuses you like for me, Hilda: say I'm eccentric, say I'm deranged, say I'm a Nihilist. I will hide under the scullery table, fling myself in the moat, lock myself in the keep, let the portcullis fall on me, die any appropriate early English death,—anything rather than curtsy in a tailor-made gown; I can kneel beautifully, Hilda, if that will do: you remember my ancestors were brought up on kneeling, and yours on curtsying, and it makes a great difference in the muscles."

Hilda smiled benignantly as she wound the coil of russet hair round her shapely head. "He will think whatever you do charming, and whatever you say brilliant," she said; "that is the advantage in being an American woman."

Just at this moment Lady Veratrum sent a haughty maid to ask us if we would meet her under the trees in the park which surrounds the house. I hailed this as a welcome reprieve to the dreaded function of tea with the duke, and made up my mind, while descending the marble staircase, that I would slip away and lose myself accidentally in the grounds, appearing only in time for the London train. This happy mode of issue from my difficulties lent a springiness to my step, as we followed a waxwork footman over the velvet sward to a nook under a group of copper beeches. But there, to my dismay, stood a charmingly appointed tea-table glittering with silver and Royal Worcester, with several liveried servants bringing cakes and muffins and berries to Lady Veratrum, who sat behind the steaming urn. I started to retreat, when there appeared, walking towards us, a simple man, with nothing in the least extraordinary about him.

"That cannot be the Duke of Cimicifugas," thought I, "a man in a corduroy jacket, without a sign of a suite; probably it is a Banished Duke come from the Forest of Arden for a buttered muffin."

But it was the Duke of Cimicifugas, and no other. Hilda was presented first, while I tried to fire my courage by thinking of the Puritan Fathers, and Plymouth Rock, and the Boston Tea-Party, and the battle of Bunker Hill. Then my turn came. I murmured some words which might have been anything, and curtsied in a stiff-necked self-respecting sort of way. Then we talked,—at least the duke and Lady Veratrum talked. Hilda said a few blameless words, such as befitted an untitled English virgin in the presence of the nobility; while I maintained the probationary silence required by Pythagoras of his first year's pupils. My idea was to observe this first duke without uttering a word, to talk with the second (if I should ever meet a second), to chat with the third, and to secure the fourth for Francesca to take home to America with her.

Of course I know that dukes are very dear, but she could afford any reasonable sum, if she found one whom she fancied; the principal obstacle in the path is that tiresome American lawyer with whom she considers herself in love. I have never gone beyond that first experience, however, for dukes in England are as rare as snakes in Ireland. I can't think why they allow them to die out so,—the dukes, not the snakes. If a country is to have an aristocracy, let there be enough of it, say I, and make it imposing at the top, where it shows most, especially since, as I understand it, all that Victoria has to do is to say, 'Let there be dukes,' and there are dukes.

Chapter VIII. Tuppenny travels in London

If one really wants to know London, one must live there for years and years.

This sounds like a reasonable and sensible statement, yet the moment it is made I retract it, as quite misleading and altogether too general.

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