

***KATE DOUGLAS
SMITH WIGGIN***



***PENELOPE'S
ENGLISH
EXPERIENCES***

Kate Douglas Smith Wiggin

Penelope's English Experiences

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Penelope Hamilton**

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Part First—In Town.

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Chapter I. The weekly bill.

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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.

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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