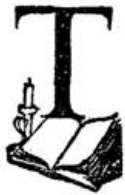


Considerate Monsieur Poiret

by Thomas Edgelow



THE train from Genoa was late, two hours or more to be exact, as it shrieked and whistled its noisy way through the environs of Paris. Those few of the passengers who had sat the whole way in the dusty upholstered carriages stretched themselves in luxurious anticipation of the baths and cool hotel bedrooms that awaited them.

Margaret Hobart, radiant despite the dust in her eighteen-year-old freshness and beauty, yawned noisily and unrestrainedly in the reserved first-class carriage which she shared with her chaperon and companion, Mrs. Fromingham.

"Good Heavens, how tired I am!" Margaret exclaimed with that characteristic of youth which always seeks expression of the feeling that is uppermost in the mind.

"My dear," remarked the older lady, with a shade of reproof in her tone, "how often am I to tell you not to express yourself so forcibly? I, too, am fatigued, but you do not see me stretching my legs all across the carriage like that."

Mrs. Fromingham blushed delicately, a mid-Victorian trait which the noise and bustle of the twentieth century had failed to stamp out in her, as she mentioned the possibility of owning such commodities as legs.

"Now, don't be cross, Fromie darling," pleaded Margaret, fixing her dark eyes quizzically on the older woman. "You know that Edgar always urges me, above everything else, to give myself expression."

Mrs. Fromingham shook a reproving head.

"Because your father permits you to address him as Edgar to his face, I do not see that you should so refer to him in his absence. Also, you must remember that so great an artist as your dear father is permitted by the world to be a little, shall I say—a little eccentric?"

"Oh, Fromie, you are too delicious!" Margaret gurgled irrepressibly. "Think of a man who absolutely refuses to wear anything but pajamas unless he is going out, being called eccentric!"

"All the same, my dear," Mrs. Fromingham continued, inwardly horrified at the mention of such garments, "your father pays me certain emoluments for the duties that are my pleasure to perform, chief among which I place that of inoculating you with the principal characteristics of a gentlewoman's deportment. But really, my dear Margaret, I cannot express to you how badly my head aches."

"Oh, what a poor old Fromie!" Margaret was instantly a ministering angel; but the bottle of *eau de Cologne* had barely been opened when the train slowed down and came to a

standstill at the long platform of the Gare de Lyons.

Dozens of excited porters having been reduced to two in number by the operation of the law of the survival of the fittest, Mrs. Fromingham and Margaret later found themselves surrounded by their baggage in an open *fiacre* bound for a hotel on the Boulevard des Capucines, in the respectability of which the former had perfect confidence, as it had been recommended to her by no less a person than Mrs. Green, wife of the Bishop of Worthing.

The information that the only rooms which could be assigned to them were No. 231, on the second floor, and No. 300, on the third, was disappointing; but as it was already nine o'clock in the evening, and Mrs. Fromingham was beginning to feel far from well, without hesitation she decided on stopping there, particularly as she was assured of adjoining-rooms on the following day.

A red-haired porter with the burr of a northern accent in his speech conducted them, first of all, to the room on the second floor, which Margaret insisted should be Mrs. Fromingham's.

"As we dined on the train, my dear, I think it would be as well if you were to go up to your room and unpack immediately," Mrs. Fromingham suggested in that plaintive voice of hers that was ever an accompaniment to any slight discomfort which might disturb her placid existence. "But be sure to come down to assure me that you are comfortably quartered before retiring for the night."

"Right-o! Fromie dear, I sha'n't be long, because I am frightfully tired and shall turn in early," Margaret acquiesced sleepily, as she followed the red-haired porter who carried her grips up to the floor above by way of the stairs, as any hotel recommended by the wife of the Bishop of Worthing would be far too old fashioned to boast so modern an innovation as an elevator.

Once alone in her room, Margaret suffered the tortures of a "slipper bath," which was carried into her room by a young and pretty chambermaid, who also waited on the floor below. By the time Margaret, clad in a negligee, had unpacked, she was so tired out that she flung herself on her bed.

Realizing that it was only a quarter to ten, and that her companion would still be in the midst of unpacking, Margaret determined to rest quietly in her room for half an hour before going down to the next floor; but even as she so determined she fell fast asleep with that delightful ease which only youth can achieve.

It was half past seven the next morning when a bright April sun, streaming in through the widely opened windows, aroused Margaret. Jumping up hastily, and still dressed as she was the night before, Margaret descended the stairs and knocked at the door of No. 231.

Receiving no answer, she pushed open the door and walked softly in.

Realizing from the fact that the room was untenanted that she had made a mistake, Margaret stepped back into the corridor. To reassure herself, she looked again at the number painted on the door. There it was, too plainly designed and boldly featured to be anything else than No. 231.

Somewhat bewildered, Margaret re-entered the room, which was not only unoccupied by Mrs. Fromingham, but contained no trace of that lady's many possessions. Even the furniture was different, and Margaret had particularly noticed and remarked upon a large and old-fashioned wardrobe that had stood in a corner by the door.

Instead, she found a suite in white enamel, so new and up to date as to leave no possibility of mistake. Obviously she had made some silly error in the number. Perhaps it was No. 232. As her hand was raised to knock at the door, it was opened, and a tall man in the early thirties, well groomed and well set up, came out into the corridor.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Margaret said falteringly; “but I’m looking for a friend of mine, and I’m not certain of the number of her room.”

“Let me help you,” he replied with a smile deep in his eyes. “What number do you think it was?”

Margaret thought a moment, tapping her little foot on the polished floor. “I was almost certain it was 231, but no one is there, and I know by the furniture that it is not the same room. I suppose that I had better knock at all the doors on this floor until I find the right one?”

Something in her tone was so pathetically helpless, so youthfully incompetent and appealing, that the American within the man rose up within him and urged him to comfort her, so that a hint of tenderness crept into his voice as he suggested the obviously simple—that Margaret return to her own room and ring for her chambermaid.

Thanking him with a little shy glance and with the hint of a smile dimpling at the corner of her lips, Margaret turned and ran lightly up the stairs to the floor above.

The young and pretty chambermaid was unable to understand the meaning of *mademoiselle*, for of *assurément mademoiselle* had come alone to the hotel the evening before. Of that the chambermaid was only too regretfully sure.

“But you’re mad,” Margaret protested in fluent French. “I came here with my friend Mrs. Fromingham, and I thought it was room No. 231 that she occupied. Go bring that red-haired porter who carried my baggage and Mrs. Fromingham’s.”

In due time the red-haired porter made smiling entrance, all willingness to serve and be of use, with a hint of expectation as to the *pourboire*. He suggested with all respect to *mademoiselle* that if, she were to sleep a little longer, perhaps she would remember on awaking refreshed that she had come all alone

to the hotel the night before.

Had not he, Alfonse himself, had the honor of carrying the baggage of *mademoiselle* from the *fiacre* to her room, when every opportunity would have been his of seeing the mysterious lady to whom *mademoiselle* so inexplicably referred?

“But it was you who carried her things up to room No. 231 in my presence,” ejaculated Margaret, by now thoroughly exasperated. “How dare you tell me such a stupid lie? Do you think I am a child to believe a fairy story like this?”

Closing the door on the mutual protestations of Alfonse and the chambermaid, Margaret rapidly donned a street costume and descended to the lobby of the hotel.

M. Boiret, the manager and proprietor, was never so surprised in all his life.

Would not *mademoiselle* consent to go back to her room until a doctor could be summoned? The long journey from Morocco had upset *mademoiselle*, and the heat of northern Africa, without doubt, had played tricks with the imagination. Of a surety a few days quiet with proper medical attendance would render *mademoiselle* herself again, when she would be laughing at the illusion that she came accompanied by any one the night before.

As chance would have it, there was a system at his hotel that entailed the noting down of the number of every *fiacre* which drove with a visitor up to his door.

The man who drove *mademoiselle* from the Gare de Lyons should instantly be summoned.

With tears of anger and mortification in her dark eyes, Margaret turned away from the desk and sat down on a lounge to await the coming of the cab. Fear of what she hardly knew began to possess her when she realized that her American friend of an hour ago was standing before her.

“Forgive me,” he said quietly; “but you look distressed. May I help you? First let me introduce myself as Rudolph Colwell of San

Francisco." And into Mr. Colwell's sympathetic ears Margaret poured out her whole story.

She had hardly finished when the driver of the *fiacre* arrived. In spite of all Colwell's cross-questioning the man stuck to his story and would not swerve from it. Again was Margaret confronted with evidence that she had arrived alone at the hotel the night before.

"There is only one thing to be done," remarked Colwell, when at last the gesticulating cabman had made excited exit, "and that is for you to catch the morning train for Calais." He paused a moment, looking tenderly down at the pathetic little figure beside him. "Tell me," he continued, struck by a new idea, "who carried the purse—you or Mrs. Fromingham?"

"I did," Margaret remarked thoughtfully. How good it was to have some one on whom to lean, besides she liked the crinkle in his hair. "Mrs. Fromingham always insisted that it was part of my education to learn to account for money. I don't think she would have more than two or three hundred francs with her. But do tell me," she went on excitedly, "that you yourself believe me. You do not think, you can't think—I—I am mad?"

Colwell laughed away her fears with a gaiety that was not only infectious but which served more than anything else to quiet her by now overstrained nerves.

Before the train left, a train which Colwell found it was imperative for him to catch as well as Margaret, he drove her to the British consulate, and naturally experienced there the usual red tape and cold indifference almost tinged with discourtesy as may be found in most similar institutions all over the world.

The consul regretted that Miss Hobart should have mislaid her companion. He referred to Mrs. Fromingham as if she were some sort of rare but valued monkey, still, if the hotel proprietor, the chambermaid, the porter, and the cabman, all agreed that Miss Hobart had arrived alone at the hotel—the reputation of which was

above reproach—was it not possible that Miss Hobart was suffering from temporary loss of memory?

He assured his listeners that many stranger events had occurred during his consular career.

"Come on, Miss Hobart," said Colwell briefly, "I will take you back to your father and let him set the machinery at work, if anything does really work in this city."

So it happened that Margaret Hobart and Rudolph Colwell traveled from Paris to London together, and so interested did they become in each other's conversation that it was with a distinct pang of conscience on reaching the London terminus at Charing Cross, that Margaret realized she had for the time entirely forgotten the worthy Mrs. Fromingham.

Now Edgar Hobart, Margaret's father, was an artist, so that when he met his daughter at Charing Cross in compliance with a telegram that had been sent off from Dover, he first of all assured Margaret on hearing her story on the London platform that he would be perfectly calm and self-possessed.

In proof of which, after insisting that Colwell should stay with them at his celebrated house in Chelsea, Mr. Hobart dashed into the detective's office on the station, and promptly started a row with every official present.

The police, he said, were utterly inefficient or it would be impossible for his daughter's companion to be kidnaped so mysteriously in Paris. He regretted he had not time to run over to that celebrated city, if only to pull the noses of the hotel proprietor, the porter, the chambermaid, the cabman, and the British consul.

Forthwith all three of them feverishly taxied to Scotland Yard, where rest in awful state the chiefs of the police department. Mr. Hobart even rang up the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, whom he had once met at a dinner at the Savage Club, and was bitterly chagrined to learn that Sir Edward was in attendance at

Windsor Castle.

Three days after his daughter's adventurous return Mr. Hobart had almost entirely forgotten the incident, and with it Mrs. Fromingham.

He was engaged at that time upon an important equestrian group that had been ordered by an Indian raja, and compared with which the appearance or non-appearance of Mrs. Fromingham seemed of little account. A few letters passed between Mr. Hobart and the foreign office, artistically plainly worded on the part of the former, severely courteous and officially impersonal on the part of the latter.

By the following August the affair was dead, to all intents and purposes, and that Mrs. Fromingham was without any relatives or friends sufficiently interested may have helped in some manner its speedier demise.

It was in late October, during Margaret's honeymoon—a honeymoon shared with no less a person than Rudolph Colwell—that a letter bearing a Paris postmark was forwarded on to Scotland from the house in Chelsea.

In it Margaret read that Marie Dupoint, the pretty chambermaid, was about to be married, and that it was her fiancé who had insisted on the letter being written before the wedding, after which they were to sail for Canada. Followed in somewhat incoherent language was the solution to the mystery of Mrs. Fromingham.

It appeared that when Margaret had left her companion alone in room No. 231, that lady had become violently ill. On a doctor being hastily summoned, M. Boiret, the proprietor, was faced with the appalling news that Mrs. Fromingham was dying of one of the lesser known but terribly virulent Oriental plagues, the seeds of

which doubtless had been sown in Morocco.

By midnight Mrs. Fromingham had lain, a yellow, twisted thing, dead on her bed, and the proprietor realized that he faced financial ruin.

Taking from his safe several thousand francs, M. Boiret had quickly and successfully bought the silence of the doctor and those servants who had witnessed Mrs. Fromingham's arrival. He had even thought of sending for the cabman, who, for the sake of a hundred francs, was prepared to swear anything anywhere.

Rolled in countless swathes of bandages wet with a strong solution of carbolic acid, the body of Mrs. Fromingham had been carefully locked up in the large wardrobe which stood within her room. The wardrobe itself, with its ghastly occupant, together with all Mrs. Fromingham's baggage and personal effects, had been hastily buried in a small garden or courtyard at the back of the building.

The rest of the furniture had been broken up and burned in a furnace in the cellar.

A house decorator, who happened to be the brother-in-law of M. Boiret, was summoned from his bed, and in two hours had repapered the room so as to add more completely to Margaret's bewilderment. Somewhat naively the letter concluded with the suggestion that at least Margaret had been saved a good deal of trouble and annoyance, to say nothing of expense.

"I am sorry for the poor old lady," Colwell remarked as he drew the shuddering Margaret closer to him; "but at least the affair, ghastly as it was, gave you to me."

Margaret, looking up at her husband in the divine selfishness of love, smiled almost happily.