

# THAT STOUT GERMAN?



BY F. BAYFORD HARRISON.

**I**N the City of Brussels a great deal of very pretty lace is exposed for sale. Englishwomen admire this lace and buy it. If they go straight from Belgium to England they can take it home without having to pay any duty; but if they pass through France they have to pay on all their new Brussels lace at the French Custom House. And many Englishwomen pass through France on their way from Belgium to England, because they prefer the short passage from Calais to Dover to the longer one from Ostend.

The Misses Wylie were charming, middle-aged ladies, fond of travel, fond of dress, fond of lace, and very bad sailors. They had been excursioning in Germany, had come down the Rhine, and had spent a week in Brussels. More attractive than the Field of Waterloo, and more fascinating than the *Musée Wiertz*, was the *Galerie St. Hubert*. Miss Melissa Wylie could not resist the white Brussels lace; Miss Annora Wylie could not resist the black. Each of the ladies bought lace; led on by the tempter, in the shape of a seductive shopwoman, the Misses Wylie bought lace *fichus*, lace collarettes, lace by the mètre. Day by day they added to their stock.

At length it was necessary to make for England, and to pass through that dreadful

France with its protective duties. Then they realized their position; how about the lace?

"We cannot conscientiously say," remarked Miss Melissa, "that we have *rien à déclarer*, because this lace is dutiable."

"And we dare not risk packing it," returned Miss Annora, "because they might take it into their heads to examine our boxes."

"How can we get it through?" mused the elder sister.

"We must get it through!" declared the younger sister.

Presently Annora exclaimed, "I have it! We will wear it! No duty is paid on what one is wearing."

"Yes, yes," said Melissa, "but how can we wear it? The white will get soiled and the black torn in travelling. Besides, if it looks unnatural, as it would on our dresses and mantles, the officials will be sure to notice it."

"It would not look unnatural on our bonnets," said Annora.

They set to work to decorate their bonnets with the lace. They mingled white and black, *fichu* and flounce, in the most skilful manner, and though the bonnets looked somewhat overdone, yet they carried the lace, and it was probable that the male eyes of the Custom House officials would not notice anything abnormal.

The Misses Wylie rejoiced in their cleverness. They sat in the train on their way to France with clear consciences and light hearts. They had *rien à déclarer*, nothing dutiable. In the compartment with them was only one other passenger, a stout man of good-humoured aspect; evidently, from his extreme flabby stoutness and his extreme good-humour, a middle-class German. Now, Germans who understand English are very sociable with their English fellow-travellers. As this German did not address the Misses Wylie, they felt sure that he did not understand English, and they talked freely to each other.

At last the train slowed into Blandain Station, the frontier! Out jumped the Misses Wylie with their hand baggage. They calmly awaited the approach of the officers. Out lumbered the German with his fatuous smile. He sauntered up to one of the chiefs of the *douane*.

"Rien à déclarer," said both ladies.

"Eau de Cologne, dentelles, tabac, spiritueux——" the officer ran off.

"Rien, rien," said the Misses Wylie.

The man said nothing more, and the ladies, expecting the cry of "En voiture, s'il vous plaît!" felt extremely happy.

But at that moment the official to whom the German had been speaking came up to them and said, in very fair English, "The ladies are fond of lace?"

Their hearts sank within them. "Rather," they conceded.

"And to carry it on the bonnet is a convenient manner of avoiding the duty."

They were undone!

"But we are wearing it!" screamed Annora; Melissa panted.

"Mesdames, I admire your ingenuity, but such an amount of new lace cannot be passed, even on your bonnets. Two, three, five mètres," he went on, measuring the unlucky lace with his eye, "*fichu*, flounce, and so forth; so many francs, or I confiscate it."

"En voiture, s'il vous

plaît!" was heard.

The sum demanded by the officer, added to what they had paid in purchase, would have made the lace the dearest that ever was bought. They tore off their bonnets, pulled out innumerable pins, set free the *fichus*, flounces, etc., put them into the officer's hands, and ran to their seats. Out of breath and out of pocket, they were most unhappy. Successful cheating is one thing; but unsuccessful cheating is another, and causes sharp pangs of conscience.

"Too bad!" cried Melissa, as the train moved on; "we were entitled to what we wore."



"THEY TALKED FREELY."

"I suppose," said Melissa, "that my bonnet looks all right? It does not strike the eyes as being too much trimmed, eh, Annora?"

"Well," said Annora, laughing, "it is too much trimmed for good taste, but then on this occasion you have bad taste. What about mine?"

"Oh, quite artistic; 'a study in black and white,' as the artists say."

The ladies laughed together, full of glee at their coming triumph over the Custom House officers. The German wore the fatuous grin affected by people who listen to a language which they do not understand.



“WE ARE WEARING IT,” SCREECHED ANNORA.”

“It was that German,” said Annora. “He understood English; he heard what we said; he told the official. Oh, a man may grin, and grin, and be a villain!”

They groaned over their misfortune. The first time the train stopped the villain entered their compartment, still grinning. They glared at him, but he still grinned. They took refuge in silence; he began to speak.

“Ladies,” he said in Londonese English, “I was very sorry to have to incur your displeasure, but I felt that it was my duty to report you at the *douane*. You had innocently told me all about the lace on your bonnets, and for the credit of our country, for the sake of English honesty, I was constrained to point out your bonnets to that official. Can you forgive me?”

“No,” said Annora.

But Melissa thought that, notwithstanding his wicked cruelty, there was something very pleasant in his smile.

“I entreat your forgiveness, ladies; more, I humbly ask a favour.”

“Sir?” exclaimed Annora.

“Miss Wylie, Miss Annora Wylie”—the presuming wretch had seen their names on their luggage, even their Christian names

—“you will confer a great favour on me if you will tell me your address.”

Annora reddened, Melissa blushed. Perhaps he was ashamed of the cruel part he had played and was about to offer an apology; perhaps their brave and gentle endurance of misfortune had touched him; perhaps their charms had so won upon him that he wished to see more of them, with a view to—their suppositions broke off abruptly.

Annora looked at Melissa, and Melissa looked at Annora. Then the elder sister spoke. “We live at 113, Angelina Gardens, Edwin Square, South Kensington, S.W.”

The stranger made a note of the address.

Melissa was on the point of asking his name, when he said abruptly, “You shall hear from me.” Then he discoursed on the country through which they were passing; after which he buried himself in a *Figaro* and talked no more. At the next stoppage he said a brusque “Good morning, ladies,” and left the compartment, and they saw no more of him.

There was a considerable flutter in the breast of Melissa, who was of a romantic turn of mind, and who could only imagine one reason why this stranger should want her address. She still believed that he was a German who spoke English remarkably well, and she had seen that he was not a gentleman; she therefore made up her mind to refuse the offer of marriage which, no doubt, he would shortly make.

Arrived in Angelina Gardens, the Misses Wylie were occupied in arranging the household, and a couple of busy days were spent by them. On the third day after their home-coming they received, by the same post, a parcel and a letter. Annora opened the carefully-tied and sealed parcel, while Melissa read the letter. Having read it once to herself, she next read it aloud to her sister:—

“MESDAMES,—I felt myself under a very great obligation to you the other day at



"YOU SHALL HEAR FROM ME."

Blandain. I am a very thin man, but I was swathed round with hundreds of yards of fine Brussels lace, and I thought that the best way of drawing the attention of the Custom House officers from myself was to draw it to you. It was purely in self-defence that I directed the raid on your bonnets. Having been the cause of the loss of your lace, I wish to make you due compensation,

and I beg leave to send you some finer lace than that which you lost.

"I am, obediently yours,

"YOUR STOUT FELLOW-TRAVELLER."

Melissa took possession of a black lace flounce, and Annora of a dozen yards of white lace and a lace-edged handkerchief, and they quite forgave the stout German for his cruelty and for his stoutness.

