

MELISSA'S TOUR.

By GRANT ALLEN.

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I glanced over her shoulder and followed her pen as she wrote.

Lucy looked across the table at me with a face of blank horror. "Oh, Vernon," she cried, "what are we ever to do? And an American at that! This is just too ghastly!"

I laid down my coffee cup and glanced back at her in surprise. "Why, what's up?" I exclaimed, scanning the envelope closely. "A letter from Oxford, surely, Mrs. Wade, of Christ Church—I thought I knew the hand. And she's not an American."

"Well, look for yourself!" Lucy cried, and tossed the note to me, pouting. I took it, and read. I'm aware that I have the misfortune to be only a man, but it really didn't strike me as quite so terrible.

"DEAR MRS. HANCOCK—George has just heard that your husband and you are going for a trip to New York this summer. Could you manage to do us a very great kindness? I hope you won't mind it. We have an American friend—a Miss Easterbrook, of Kansas City—niece of Professor Asa P. Easterbrook, the well known Yale geologist, who very much wishes to find an escort across the Atlantic. If you would be so good as to take charge of her and deliver her safely to Dr. Horace Easterbrook, of Hoboken, on your arrival in the states, you would do a good turn to her and at the same time confer an eternal favor on yours very truly,
EMILY WADE."

Lucy folded her hands in melodramatic despair. "Kansas City!" she exclaimed

with a shudder of horror. "And Asa P. Easterbrook! A geologist, indeed! That horrid Mrs. Wade! She just did it on purpose!"

"It seems to me," I put in regarding the letter closely, "she did it merely because she was asked to find a chaperon for the girl, and she wrote the very shortest possible note, in a perfunctory way, to the very first acquaintance she chanced to hear of who was going to America."

"Vernon!" my wife exclaimed, with a very decided air, "you men are such simpletons! You credit everybody always with the best and purest motives. But you're utterly wrong. I can see through that woman. The hateful, hateful wretch! She did it to spite me! Oh, my poor, poor boy; my dear, guileless Bernard?"

Bernard, I may mention, is our eldest son, aged just twenty-four, and a Cambridge graduate. He's a tutor at King's, and though he's a dear, good fellow and a splendid longstop I couldn't myself conscientiously say I regard guilelessness as quite his most marked characteristic.

"What are you doing?" I asked as Lucy sat down with a resolutely determined air at her writing table in the corner.

"Doing?" my wife replied, with some asperity in her tone. "Why, answering that hateful, detestable woman!"

I glanced over her shoulder and followed her pen as she wrote:

"MY DEAR MRS. WADE—It was indeed a delight to us to see your neat little handwriting again. Nothing would give us greater pleasure, I'm sure, than to take charge of your friend, who, I'm confident, we shall find a most charming companion. Bernard will be with us, so she won't feel it dull, I trust. We hope to have a very delightful trip, and your happy thought in providing us with a traveling companion will add, no doubt, to all our enjoyment—especially Bernard's. We both join in very kindest regards to Mr. Wade and yourself, and I am ever yours most cordially,
"LUCY B. HANCOCK."

My wife fastened down the envelope with a very crushing air. "There, that ought to do for her," she said, glancing up at me triumphantly. "I should think she could see from that, if she's not as blind as an owl, I've observed her atrocious designs upon Bernard and mean to checkmate them. If, after such a letter, she has the cheek to send us her Yankee girl to chaperon, I shall consider her lost to all sense of shame and all notions of decency. But she won't, of course. She'll withdraw her unobtrusively." And Lucy flung the peccant sheet that had roused all this wrath on to the back of the fireplace with offended dignity.

She was wrong however. By next evening's post a second letter arrived, more discomposing, if possible, to her nerves than the first one.

"Mrs. Lucy B. Hancock, London:

"DEAR MADAM—I learn from my friend Mrs. Wade, of Oxford college, that you are going to be kind enough to take charge

of me across the ocean. I thank you for your courtesy and will gladly accept your friendly offer. If you will let me know by what steamer you start I will register my passage right away in Liverpool. Also, if you will be good enough to tell me from what depot you leave London, and by what train, I will go along with you in the cars. I'm unused to travel alone. Respectfully,

"MELISSA P. EASTERBROOK."

Lucy gazed at it in despair. "A creature like that!" she cried, all horror-struck. "Oh, my poor, dear Bernard! The ocean, she says! Go along with you in the cars! Melissa P. Easterbrook!"

"Perhaps," I said tentatively, "she may be better than her name. And at any rate, Bernard's not bound to marry her!"

Lucy darted at me profound volumes of mute feminine contempt. "The girl's pretty," she said at last, after a long, deep pause, during which I had been made to realize to the full my own utter moral and intellectual nothingness. "You may be sure she's pretty. Mrs. Wade wouldn't have foisted her upon us if she wasn't pretty, but unspeakable. It's a vile plot on her part to destroy my peace of mind. You won't believe it, Vernon; but I know that woman. And what does the girl mean by signing herself 'Respectfully,' I wonder?"

"It's the American way," I ventured gently to interpose.

"So I gather," my wife answered, with a profound accent of contempt. To her anything that isn't done in the purest English way stands, ipso facto, self condemned immediately.

A day or two later a second letter arrived from Miss Easterbrook, in reply to one of Lucy's suggesting a rendezvous. I confess it drew up in my mind a somewhat painful picture. I began to believe my wife's fears were in some ways well grounded.

"Mrs. Lucy B. Hancock, London," (as before).

"DEAR MADAM—I thank you for yours and will meet you on the day and hour you mention at St. Pancras depot. You will know me when you see me, because I shall wear a dove colored dress, with bonnet to match, and a pair of gray spectacles. Respectfully,

"MELISSA P. EASTERBROOK."

I laid it down and sighed. "A New England schoolmarm!" I exclaimed with a groan. "It sounds rather terrible. A dove colored dress and a pair of gray spectacles! I fancy I can picture her to myself—a tall and bony person of a certain age, with corkscrew curls, who reads improving books and has views of her own about the fulfillment of prophecy."

But as my spirits went down, so Lucy's went up, like the old man and woman in the cottage weather glass. "That looks more promising," she said. "The spectacles are good. Perhaps after all dear Bernard may escape. I don't think he's at all the sort of person to be taken with a dove colored bonnet."

For some days after Bernard came