



'WE'LL HAVE IT OUT FIRST. YOU'VE GIVEN ME AWAY TO PAGE!'

THE TWO SKIPPERS

BY OWEN OLIVER

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ILLUSTRATED BY LESTER RALPH

IN the days of my youth I flattered myself that I was a spendthrift, but I am afraid that, for a millionaire's son, my ideas of extravagance were elementary. Anyhow, my father generally thought it cheaper to pay my bills than to spend time complaining of them. He is Silas Bunney Tank, the railroad man, and his time is worth a dollar a second.

The batch that I gave him on my twenty-third birthday was such an improvement that he sent for me.

"Look here," he said, "if I square this lot, you'll have to marry and settle down to business."

"Hadn't I better settle down first?" I suggested.

I didn't specially want to marry, but I'd always wanted to be in the business. Hitherto my father had objected that I was "too irresponsible."

"Very well," he agreed. "You can go across the pond and get the hang of the London branch. Page will teach you."

"There's nothing to do in the London branch," I objected.

So far as I could make out, the London branch existed chiefly to provide employment for the Hon. Talbot Page, and the Hon. Talbot Page existed chiefly to introduce me into English society. A duchess had once turned up her nose at the governor, so he had made up his mind that we would hobnob with the British peerage.

"Then you'll have plenty of time to look round for a wife," father retorted coolly. "Peer's daughter! Otherwise you can please yourself."

I meant to please myself, peer's daughter or not, but I didn't tell father. He is obstinate. So am I.

I went over to London, and Page put me into high society, with a view to marriage. Society was kind to me with the same view. I didn't care for it, and decided to have a holiday. I spoke to Harder about it. He was the chap that old Page had given me for a private secretary—a good sport and a good fellow, and too clever quite to conceal his cleverness, though he tried. The English aristocracy are ashamed of brains.

"Look here, Harder," I said, "I'm sick of being hunted like a marriageable rabbit. I want a close season. Let's go some place where not a soul will know me!"

"The Broads," he proposed promptly. "We could have a little yacht, and do for ourselves."

We slipped off the next morning, hired a little five-tonner called the Fairy, and set out from Wroxham. Harder sailed her and I did the cooking. We shared the cleaning-up and the foraging for provisions in the country villages. We dressed anyhow, and didn't trouble to shave every day. Harder looked like a tramp, and I looked like a boatman, having taken to a blue sweater, which only professional skippers wear on the Broads. We had a good time.

On the fourth evening we had just tied up at Ranworth Staithe, when another yacht came in. She was called Moonshine. There were three people aboard, besides the skipper—a lad of sixteen, a young girl of eighteen, a pretty little miss with a plait, and a gorgeous beauty of about twenty-two. She made me feel breathless.

"Oh, Harder!" I muttered. "*What* a girl!"

Harder glanced up for an instant from lacing the awning.

"All face," he pronounced, and went on with his lacing. "The youngster's worth a dozen of her, if I'm any judge."

"You aren't," I said. "You cold-blooded frog!"

He laughed.

"Wait till you're seven and twenty," he remarked.

I didn't argue with him—he's so confidently superior!—but I made up my mind that the beauty was my fate, and I'd got to know her somehow.

After tea, Harder went off seeking for provisions. I got into conversation with the skipper of the beauty's yacht, who was ready enough to talk. He was a Potter Heigham man, and didn't know the Wroxham boatmen very well. He took me for a new skipper—the blue sweater did it!—and spoke of Harder as my "governor." His people were very troublesome, he complained. They made him sail more than the proper daily amount, and when there was no wind he had to "quant" for hours. (It's a long pole that they push the boats with.)

"They're looking for a chap named Tank," he said. "Seen anything of him?"

"I think there was a fellow of that name, at Ludham yesterday," I said.

"What was he in?" he asked like a shot. "It's a quid if I find him."

"The Myrtle, I think," I answered; and he promised to stand me a long drink if he got the sovereign.

"Why do they want to find him?" I asked.

"Girl's setting her cap at him," he stated. "He's got a pot of money, from what I've overheard."

"What's their name?" I inquired.

"Page," he said; and then I saw the trap!

I went back on the Fairy, and fumed till Harder came. He was smoking a pipe, and carrying a paper package of chops, and a loaf of bread, and a bag of apples, and a couple of bottles, and looked more like a tramp than ever.

"Now for supper!" he chuckled, dumping his load in the well.

"Darn supper!" I growled. "We'll have it out first. You've given me away to Page!"

He worked his lips in and out and looked at me by the light of the solitary candle in the tent. It was made with an awning over the well; and that's the part of the boat that isn't decked.

"I told him we were coming on the Broads," he owned, "if you call that giving you away. He's responsible to your father, you see, and I'm responsible to him."

"You said you hadn't fixed up our program, and we'd have to leave it to the wind," I reminded him.

"That's right," he said. "I only told him we were coming on the Upper Broads."

"And the name of the boat?"

"No. I haven't told him that. I ought to have wired, but I wasn't going to give him the chance of recalling us. Well?"

"I suppose," I remarked, "you're not a liar?"

He put his elbows on the table.

"If I were you," he said, in a voice like freezing water, "I'd stick to that supposition. It will save a row. You young ass!"

"No," he assured me.

"It's Page," I told him.

He whistled.

"They're looking all over the Broads for a



I HAD FORGOTTEN THAT I WAS A BOATMAN, AND WAS DISCUSSING "MADAMA BUTTERFLY"

We stared at each other.

"It isn't to save a row," I said at last, "but I don't think you're a liar, Harder. Do you know the name of that girl?"

chap named Tank. The skipper's to have a sov for finding him."

He leaned back and laughed.

"So that's old Page's game!" he said.

"He wants to marry you off to his sister without quarreling with your governor! Well, she shall have a good dance over the Broads if she wants to catch you. I told you she was all looks, didn't I?"

"And I told you you were wrong," I said stubbornly. "I'm going to prove it."

I mean to talk to the girl, and not let her know who I am, and—look here, Harder, this is deadly serious to me. Do you give me your word of honor that you are not in it? And



THE BEAUTY
WAS MOST
GRACIOUS
TO ME

that you won't be? And that she sha'n't get a chance to know me through you?"

"My word of honor," he said readily. "I'm not in it; she doesn't know me, and sha'n't; and I'll let you play your own hand on one condition—that *you* won't let her find out who you are, unless and until you find that she's willing to marry you as a poor man."

I gave him my word, and then we fried the chops and had supper.

It was ten o'clock, and we were sitting on the stern, smoking, when the skipper of the beauty's yacht staggered down to the stage with a pal. His yacht was lying a little way out, so the pal put him off in a dingy. He

stepped on the stern and staggered along the waterway. The waterway is a narrow side-deck, outside the cabin top and the well. Then he fell against the awning and caromed into the water with a splash. It wasn't more than four feet deep, but he couldn't swim, and was too drunk to find his feet. His mate jumped on the yacht and leaned over, groping for him in the dark.

"Pull yourself together, Bill!" he counseled. "Pull yourself together!"

Bill said nothing. His mate was hauling him up by the back of his sweater, leaving his head dangling in the water, so his silence was not surprising. He was half drowned when I pushed over there in our dingy and fished him out. His drunken mate nearly throttled him, trying to pull his sweater over his head without unbuttoning it, and I bundled him into his boat and sent him off.

"I'd like to chuck you off, too, you drunken brute!" I told the skipper. "You're a nice chap to be running a lady's boat!"

"Send him ashore!" a haughty female voice cried through the skylight of the first cabin, where the ladies would sleep. "I won't have him aboard again! Perhaps you could find me another skipper, my good man?"

She evidently took me for a boatman, and I had a sudden idea.

"Well, ma'am," I said, "I don't know of

any about here. You'd have to send to Wroxham or Potter Heigham, I expect. But my governor's able to manage his boat for himself if he likes, and I dare say he'd turn me over to you for a few days."

We struck the bargain there and then, through the skylight. I was to have twenty-five shillings a week and my board, and sixpence a day for beer. I took the skipper ashore, deposited him in a humble lodging, and went back to tell Harder. He laughed till he almost cried.

"You've forgotten one thing, my boy," he cried. "You haven't the remotest notion of sailing a boat."

"By Jove!" I owned. "I haven't, now I come to think of it!"

"And you don't know the geography of the Broads."

"No," I agreed. "Get out the map and show me."

He whistled.

"You're going on with it?"

"Of course!"

He didn't argue, but fished out a map and taught me the geography of the place. Next he gave me instructions in sailing, illustrating the points with a piece of chalk on the top of the table. Then he went around our boat with a candle, showing me which ropes were which. The candle generally blew out at the critical moment, so I didn't get things very clear in my mind.

When we had finished this, we went to bed. Harder laughed in his sleep—if the beggar wasn't shamming—while I lay awake, planning a course of action. I would be a superior sort of boatman, I decided—a gentleman down on his luck. If I could win the beauty under these conditions, I need have no doubt of her affection.

II

I WENT aboard the Moonshine at half-past six the next morning, and began tidying up the fore-peak, where the skipper's berth was. The youth—his name was Harry Page—came out, nodded to me, and went off in their dingey for a wash. The beauty did not appear before breakfast. The pigtail girl came out in a morning-gown, looking as fresh as paint.

"So you're the new skipper," she said. "I want you to let me sail the boat sometimes. I understand it, but they think I don't."

"All right, missie," I said. "We'll see. I'm a bit strange to this boat myself, and hardly know what is what yet."

I dived down the hatch for some hot water to wash the supper things that my predecessor had left dirty. When I put out my head again, the pigtail girl was sitting on the end of the cabin top, beside the mast, and smiling at my searches in the confusion of the fore-peak.

"There's a brush to do them with," she explained. "It's in the corner. Look!" She pointed down the hatch. "You wash them and I'll wipe. I always help."

So we washed up the things between us. Then she went and laid the breakfast in the well while I boiled the water and fried eggs and bacon. She ran forward every now and then to see how I was getting on. She was a nice, friendly girl, and I thought she'd make a good sister-in-law.

She served out my breakfast, and ran forward with that, too.

"You're very kind, missie," I acknowledged.

"I want to be good friends," she explained, "so that you'll let me sail the boat. I really do understand it, but they won't believe I do."

"We'll see," I promised; "but we'll be friends, missie, right enough."

After breakfast there was a lot more washing-up and clearing things away; and, as nobody helped, except the pigtail girl, it took a long while. She was very active, and even took down the awning and unrolled the sail-cover and stowed them away.

"Now," she said, "we're ready to start, aren't we?"

"Ye-es," I assented.

I was trying to recollect how I was to do it. I looked over to Harder and made signals of distress, and he called:

"Hi, skipper!" he said. "Just come and help me for a minute, will you?"

I jumped into the dingey and went over to him, and, while I helped get his boat ready, he whispered instructions.

"First find the topping-lift," he directed. "It will be here—like this. Hoist up the boom a few inches, and ask that jolly little thing with the pigtail to lift the crutches away. Let the boom down again for the moment; fold up the crutches, and shy them into the dingey. Then hoist up the jib—this rope, see. The hook on the lift goes in this eye. Next haul up your mainsail as far as it will go. Make it tight—like this. Mind the rope's fast, or you'll have the whole show come down. Then make this rope tight—not too tight—as I explained last night. Then go astern and fasten up the jib-sheet—

leave just enough play to let it run over. It crosses by itself, I see. So you've only one cleat, not two, as we have. You'll only have to deal with the mainsail, and leave the jib to adjust itself, you understand, not pull it over as I do. Next see that the main-sheet is fast, so that the end won't run out of the blocks, but leave it loose. Then go ahead and pull up the anchor. Ask Pigtail to stand at the helm. Have the quant ready. As soon as the anchor's up, push off on the port bow—"

"Which is that?" I asked.

"Left hand, you chump! Tell Pigtail to put the tiller hard over on the same side—boat goes the reverse way, you know."

"I know *that*!" I claimed.

"About all you do! When you've turned nearly at right angles, tell her to pull in the sheet tight. Then run down and take the tiller. As she gets round, let the sheet right out again. You'll have the wind dead behind. Steer straight for that opening—where we came in. It's a narrow channel, and you'll be aground if you get out of it. I'll be just ahead. Follow me, and do as I do—or let Pigtail. I expect she knows more about it than you do!"

"I'll put my trust in Pigtail," I said. "Come and help us off when we're aground."

I returned to my new yacht and laboriously carried out Harder's directions. The beauty and her brother—he was an effeminate young ass, and never offered to lend a hand—read without lifting their eyes from their books. Pigtail acted as crew, watching for every word or sign, with her eager little face alert. One couldn't help liking the girl.

By some freak of fortune things went all right. As soon as we were fairly going, the beauty and her brother asked if they could go and lie on the fore-deck.

"Yes," I said, "if you keep your heads low when the jib crosses over." Harder always told me that.

"It won't with the wind behind," Pigtail suggested, with a surprised glance at me.

"I meant presently," I said, "when we turn, missie."

"My sister thinks she understands sailing," the beauty said, with a toss of her head. It was the first time she had spoken to me, except to say good morning. Evidently I was merely a part of the boat to her; and somehow I didn't care. She showed up badly when I compared her with the jolly little pigtail girl.

"It seems to me that she has a good idea of it," I stated; and, when the others had

gone forward, I whispered to Pigtail: "Take the helm and try, missie," I said. "I'll tell you if you're going wrong. You've got to keep us straight for that opening. It's a narrow channel, you see."

"Thank you," the girl said, and stood up beside the tiller, while I stared knowingly at the sail, and watched Harder's boat to see what he was doing.

She sailed as straight as a die for the opening. Then we turned a little, and the sail swung across with a bang that startled me.

"Why does it do that?" she asked.

I really hadn't the least idea why it did, so I temporized.

"Come, come, missie," I protested. "See if you can't think it out."

She considered, with her finger on her chin. She was a pretty youngster, I decided—not an overpowering beauty, like her sister, but dainty and provoking in her demure way.

"I suppose," she suggested, "the wind isn't *exactly* behind, and it pushes the sail over to the side that is most in front of it. They call it jibbing, don't they?"

"That's it," I said with relief. "You'll make a sailor, missie! Which way are we going this morning?"

She asked her sister, and her sister whispered to her brother, and he came and talked to me in his haw-haw way.

"We want to find two chaps named Harder and—er—Tank," he said. "We—I don't know them exactly, but—er—they're friends of friends, and—I'd like to see whether they're the sort to know before I speak to them, you see."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Mind, missie! You're getting near the bank."

Pigtail put the boat out more in the center. She was flushed, and looked as if she did not relish the conversation.

"Seen anything of them?" the youth asked.

"Well," I said, "now you mention it, I remember a gentleman calling another gentleman 'Harder' up at Ludham yesterday. They were by themselves in a boat something like this, only smaller. Might have been the Myrtle. Yes, that's it, I expect. They were talking of going up to Stalham."

"We'll go to Stalham," he decided.

Then he rejoined the beauty forward. Pigtail drummed impatiently with her foot.

"Seems as you're not very anxious to find them, missie," I suggested.

"I'm not," she said emphatically.

I was glad to find that she was not a man-hunter; but I might have known it. She

was such an upright and downright little person.

"I'll remember that in future," I told her, watching Harder's boat.

We were coming to the Bure, and had to turn at a sharp angle. To my horror he went to the left, while we were going to the right. I saw that he pulled in the sail, so I supposed that we should have to let ours out more, as we were turning in the other direction.

I told Pigtail so. She looked at me and laughed.

"You're trying to see if I know!" she declared. "Please don't tease me, because I really want to learn. I have to pull it in to go across the wind, don't I?"

"Yes, missie," I agreed.

I hoped she was correct. She evidently was, for we turned all right.

We went along comfortably for a time with a light side breeze. I even ventured to take the tiller for a bit, and we talked. We had talked for half an hour and got on to music, and I had forgotten that I was a boatman, and was discussing "Madama Butterfly." Then I caught Pigtail eying me curiously, and I hastily relapsed into indifferent English.

III

We came to the mouth of the Ant at last. Harder had turned in pursuit, but he was far behind, and I didn't know what would happen when I tried to turn the boat.

"Now, missie," I proposed, "we'll see if you know how to sail *this* bend," and I gave her the tiller.

She let the sail right out as we rounded the corner, and we flew away, leaving Harder farther behind. I grasped one principle of sailing, I thought—that you let the sail out when you are in front of the wind, and pull it tight when the wind is on the side. In some of the bends, when the wind was partly behind and partly sideways, she let the sail half out; so I noted that, too. I began to think that I knew a lot about sailing; and then I saw Ludham Bridge ahead.

It was only a very low, narrow arch. I thought that the boat would go through, except the mast. It was evident that the mast wouldn't; so I was in a regular fix.

"We'd better stop here and have lunch," I proposed.

It would give Harder time to come up, I thought, and I could ask him what to do.

"We might go through the bridge first, don't you think?" Pigtail said. "Then we

should be ready to go on after lunch. I can steer while you get the mast down."

I stared at her helplessly. Harder and I hadn't been under any bridges, and I hadn't the least idea how to take down the mast.

"You see," I explained, "I—I'm new to this boat."

Pigtail looked at me fixedly.

"Yes," she agreed, "I see that." She eyed me doubtfully for a time, and bit her lips. "The mast unfastens down in the forepeak," she volunteered at length. "There's a weight on the end as a counterpoise."

"Yes," I said humbly.

I went forward and got down the hatch. I could see where the mast unfastened, but the stove and all sorts of tins and pans were in the way, and then a doubt occurred to me whether I ought to let down the sails first, or the wires that held the mast at the side. Harder called them "stays." I was still hesitating when I heard Pigtail call:

"Skipper! Skipper!"

I put my head out of the hatch, and saw that we were close to the bridge!

"Shall I put in here?" she called, and motioned to the bank.

"Yes, please," I said.

"Are you ready with the anchor?" she asked; and I jumped out and seized it.

"Yes, miss," I said.

She laid the yacht gently against the shore—Harder couldn't have done it better—and I jumped off and made fast. Then we prepared lunch. She did not bring mine, but left me to fetch it. She avoided my eyes, and did not speak to me except to whisper some directions about lowering and raising the mast, before we set out again. I succeeded in executing them, and we got through the bridge, and sailed slowly along the Upper Ant.

The wind had dropped and we did little more than drift. When the tide turned we began to go backward; so I took up the quant.

It was an enormous pole, and almost too heavy to lift. You dig the spiked end in the mud, put your shoulder against the round end, and walk from the bow to the stern of the boat, along the narrow side deck, pushing. Then you walk forward, and do it again. I did it about fifty times, and it made me pant. Pigtail stood at the tiller, watching my unpractised efforts. The others were lying on cushions, in the bows, reading, and took no notice.

After fifty-odd pushes, the quant stuck hard in the mud, and I was too much ex-

hausted to wrench it out. I should have been pulled into the water if Pigtail had not grabbed me by the blue sweater. She tugged at me, and I tugged at the quant, and at last it came out. I panted and mopped my forehead. The others had not noticed, luckily.

"I'll quant now," she offered.

"Indeed," I said, "you sha'n't!"

"Well," she said defiantly, "if you won't let me quant, I won't steer! You have to teach me the whole business, you know, Mr. Boatman." She smiled sarcastically, and I lifted the quant savagely, to go on again; but she touched my arm. "You're too done up to go on," she whispered, "*and it will give you away, if we stop!*"

"What a little brick you are!" I said warmly.

She took the quant and tramped up and down the side, pushing bravely. I had a new sensation when I saw that little girl struggling with the huge pole—doing my work just to avoid giving me away. It was a sensation of partnership, as if I wanted to walk behind and hold her in my arms and help push. I think I shall feel like that all the rest of my life!

In a few minutes a quiet breeze sprang up, and she put down the quant and came and sat in the well. I offered her the tiller, but she shook her head.

"Teach me, then, please," I said humbly. "I need it."

"Why did you pretend to be a boatman?" she asked. "I suppose it was sis?"

"It was," I said; "but it isn't. She wouldn't look at a poor man."

"No," Pigtail agreed, "she wouldn't."

"I don't want her to," I stated.

"Then you can make some excuse to go, and we will find a real boatman."

"Let me stay," I urged, "and learn sailing from you. We're pretty good friends, I think. Why didn't you give me away?"

She flashed a look at me.

"Do you think I am the sort to give any one away?" she asked. "I saw through you from the first."

"And you let me stay! Let me stay still, please!"

She did not answer, and I took silence for consent.

IV

WE meandered on all the afternoon, up the dreamy Ant, with its border of rushes and water-lilies hemming in a stream so narrow that the boat almost brushed the edges on either side. I steered, and Pigtail directed

me in whispers. We crossed Barton Broad and found the river again, and went on to Stalham; and there we made fast for the night.

After tea, the beauty and her brother went for a walk. Pigtail stayed behind. She was going to sit in the dingy and fish, she said; but, instead of fishing, she helped me wash up, and then we sat and talked. Oh, wise little Pigtail! How she talked!

The stars peeped out, and the moon; and the wind came murmuring over the placid broad. Books and music and dances and society and riches—we talked of all these; and all these, said little Pigtail, were nothing to living your life; and living your life was doing things for other people.

"Even people who are wicked shams and don't deserve it, and can't sail and can't quant!" she told me, with a laugh in her eyes.

"It makes them *want* to deserve it," I said, "even if they know they never can."

Presently the beauty and the boy returned. They brought some one else with them. I knew him as soon as he stepped aboard. It was Page—old Page!

He knew me, too. I held up a candle for them to step on the plank from the stage to the boat, and the light happened to fall upon my face.

"Good gracious!" he cried. "Tank!"

The boy jumped, and the beauty gave a sharp cry of astonishment. Pigtail made a funny little sound in her throat. I don't suppose any one else heard; but if a thousand people shouted, and she just whispered, I should hear *her*.

"I thought I'd earn an honest penny for once in my life," I said. "Twenty-five shillings a week, sixpence a day for beer, and food found!"

"I think it was a chivalrous desire to help a woman in distress," the beauty said. "Thank you, Mr. Tank."

She held out her hands, and was all smiles. We sat down in the tent over the well and talked. The beauty was most gracious to me, and the boy was affable. Page sat and smiled and rubbed his hands. Providence had a way of picking out the people who ought to know one another, he sententiously remarked, and it was no use quarreling with Providence.

Pigtail had disappeared. I could just see the dingy through the awning curtains. I thought I could distinguish a figure in it.

After half an hour I slipped out through the canvas curtains and stood on the coun-

ter. There *was* a silent figure in the dingey. I stepped down into the boat, untied the painter, and pushed off. Then I took the oars and rowed softly. They did not know that we had gone till we were hidden in the dark. Presently we ran aground among some weeds; and then Pigtail found her voice.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh! You—you bad sailor!"

Her voice shook. I put down the oars and leaned toward her.

"I'm a bad sailor," I said, "and I expect I'll always be running aground, but—but—will you sail with me—and teach me—all my life? Oh, little girl! Little girl!"

"I will sail with you," said Pigtail. "If you float, I will float; and if you go down, I will go down."

I found a wet face against mine, and a trembling girl in my arms. The wind rustled the reeds that lay about us, like a cradle. The moon came peeping over the edge of the reeds. It lay upon my little girl's face, and

made a gentle, white saint of her. I kissed her reverently; and deep down in my heart I prayed a prayer.

"I don't know what your father will say," Page protested, when I told him that I was going to marry Maisie. That is her name.

"I do," I said. "The governor is a sensible man."

I treated him as such—sent a photo of Maisie, and a frank account of the whole affair. I intended to settle down and marry, I said. He cabled back:

Marry and settle down.

He cabled Maisie his love, and the present of a new yacht. She named it the Two Skippers.

"To claim your share of the command?" father suggested, when he came over.

"No, dear," she answered—nobody else would dare to "dear" father!—"to claim my share of the work!"

There you have Maisie!

DREAM SHORE

STEP a day-dream's length with me,
And we stand beside a sea
White with sails from lands afar—
Country of the evening star,
Province of the moon, the port
Ruled by fair Titania's court,
And the climes where Fancy dwells
In dream-guarded citadels.

See, a galleon freighted deep
With the merchandise of sleep—
Perfume from the lotus lands,
Wreaths entwined by angel hands;
Balm for eye and ear and brain,
Anodyne for care and pain;
Frankincense and myrrh and musk
From the shadowy isles of dusk.

On the water's farthest verge,
Just where sky and mountain merge,
Dreams are slipping to the sea;
Hear them call to you and me:
"Fast across the sea we sail,
Wafted by a starlit gale;
Soon our magic will be wrought
In the thoroughfares of thought!"

Let us longer linger here
On the busy world's frontier,
Leaving inland all the whir,
All the clamor and the stir;
Hearing but the splash of waves
Echoed in the coral caves,
Watching ship and shallop float
On to havens dim, remote!

Clarence Urmy

THE BACHELORS' DINNER

BY KATHARINE EGGLESTON

AUTHOR OF "THE KIDNAPING OF HELEN HALL," ETC.

"I'M ready for something serious now," Margaret Waldon said as she stirred her tea.

"Does that mean Joe?" Alice Winthrop asked, helping herself to a third lump of sugar.

"Well, it might!" Margaret laughed and blushed a little.

"So am I!" Wilda Thayer cried with enthusiasm. "I've had my summer at Tuxedo, and it was a dream! But one can't go on dreaming forever. You have to wake up and think about—"

"Wallace Ames," Margaret interpolated.

"Do you know, Margaret," Alice began, "I have always wondered what particular device you took to stand Joe off. He was so dreadfully in earnest!"

"Yes, he was," Margaret agreed, with a satisfied little nod which somehow gave the impression that she realized what a provocation to desperate courting she provided. "But, you see, I told him that I couldn't think of being married till I had had a taste of official life. I couldn't settle down to humdrum married existence just as father had been sent to the Senate. It was too much to ask of one girl!"

"And he realized it?" Katharine Courtney inquired.

"Well, he couldn't very well marry me unless I was willing, could he?" Margaret asked, smiling.

"I told Wallace that I'd be ready after this summer," Wilda Thayer continued. "I knew there were going to be things that would make Tuxedo too good to miss; and I wasn't going to miss it. That was just the whole thing, and he had to make up his mind to wait."

"We've been telling you why we put off our weddings, Alice. It's your turn now," Margaret said, turning to the slender, expensive-looking girl in the modish fall gown that talked subtly of disguised detail representing a month's salary for the average man.

"Papa and mama had a very plain talk with Hardin, and he—we decided to put it off indefinitely."

The reply was evasive, and the other girls glanced quickly at the speaker. They had rather more curiosity about Alice's postponed wedding than about any of the others. Each one considered the advisability of pushing the matter to a point where the self-contained Miss Winthrop must either do some more explaining or feel herself underestimated, actually suspected of having been jilted by Hardin Norris.

It was Katharine Courtney who broke the silence.

"It looks a little as if you had all put off marrying till there was nothing else interesting to do—had made a kind of last resort of it!"

"A girl gives up a great deal," Alice affirmed positively.

"She might be supposed to get something in exchange," Katharine suggested.

"What a mopey crowd!" Beatrice Anstruther cried, crossing the threshold into Margaret's gray and green boudoir, with every indication of health and happiness rioting in her cheeks and eyes and buoyant carriage. "What's the matter?"

"We were considering a very serious question," Margaret said, after the girls had greeted the blooming young matron at whose June wedding they had helped to make an impressive pageant.

"You look happy," Alice observed, studying her friend critically.

"So that's your serious question!" Mrs. Anstruther exclaimed, making an intuitive leap into the very heart of the situation. "Had all the fun you want for the last year, and now you are ready to make Hardin Norris"—she glanced at Alice as she spoke the name—"and Wallace Ames"—Wilda's face flushed under her gaze—"and Joe Gary miserable."

"I don't think they regard it in that light,"