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ON THE  
DAY  
BOAT

By LUCY  
BARNES

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Margaret was sure that there was something wrong. A sense of the fitness of things had been growing upon her for full fifteen minutes. Seated in the corner of a big divan on the Albany day boat, she had gradually awakened to the realization that, no matter who passed by, glances furtive and open had been cast in her direction.

Not that this was an unusual attention for Margaret to receive. Glances of admiration had followed her ever since she had passed from spinning girlhood into glorious young womanhood. But these glances were different. The expression in the eyes of the women said quite clearly, "Thank heaven I am not as you are!" The admiration in the eyes of men was mixed unmistakably with pity.

Margaret reached blindly in the direction of her hat. The little bend in the back was squarely above the call at the nape of the neck. Perhaps it had slipped back too far. She raised her hand and felt of her pompadour. She knew by touch that there was just enough hair showing in the front. It might be soot on the tip of her nose. She drew forth her handkerchief and dabbed the tip of that member, but no spot showed on the cambric. Then she tried her chin and her cheek bones with the same result.

An odious woman, lolling in a patent rocker, smiled at her, but it was a pitying smile. Not for worlds would Margaret have asked that woman what was wrong. And a woman who wore a lace net dress to travel in would not have sense enough to tell another woman what had happened.

By the time Margaret had reached this conclusion she was actually perspiring with nervousness. She was not a girl whose thoughts ran entirely on dress and appearance, but she viewed with scorn the un-groomed woman. And at this moment she was morally certain that her grooming had slipped a cog. She revisited the management of the boat line which did not panel its saloon with mirrors, but not for worlds would she have walked the length of that saloon to a dressing room. She preferred to sit in the limelight of the restless passengers to running the gantlet of the lounging passengers.

She was ready to call herself names for having declined, with thanks, the vanity bag her brother Dick had wanted to give her on her birthday. She had taken a new collar for Pedro. Poor Pedro, grieving in the baggage room in the hold at this moment! What wouldn't she give now for the tiny mirror reposing in the rejected vanity bag?

Just then a young man loomed upon her gloomy mental horizon. The boat had made a landing at one of those small towns from which tourists reached the Catskills. The young man looked exceedingly cheerful and harmless. Margaret decided upon this the instant her troubled glance met his. His eyes were the sort to create a feeling of trust. He was good looking, but Margaret instantly decided that he couldn't be blamed for that. Anyhow, he was looking for somebody, and she became restless. She met his look of inquiry with a nod of invitation and deliberately drew her skirts to one side as if to make room for him on the divan.

The young man accepted the unspoken invitation with alacrity. He stood before her, hat in hand.

"A wfully good of you," he said, looking down at her frankly. "I didn't recognize you at first. You've changed quite a bit since you had that last picture taken."

Margaret gasped. She had thought her own impertinence quite impossible once the die was cast, but this young man's nerve was monumental. She lowered her voice so that the woman in lace net could not hear what she said.

"Sit down, please, and I'll explain. Of course you were not looking for me, I know that. But you—play the part much better than I could. I was in such trouble, and I just had to speak to you."

Just for an instant a puzzled expression passed over the man's face. Then he pulled himself together and sat down beside her.

"I am tremendously glad to be of service to any lady in distress. What particular form of distress has overtaken you?"

Margaret looked straight into his trust inspiring eyes, and her own danced.

"I am a victim of woman's 'inhumanity' to woman. Don't you dare to laugh when I tell you this, but every woman who has passed me for the last half hour has looked at me as if my hat was crooked or I had soot on my nose or my skirt and blouse had parted company. Will you please tell me what is the matter?"

The young man tried not to give way to the mirth which was welling up within him and looked her over critically.

"Well," he said judiciously, "I can't see anything wrong except that the thing you wear for a collar seems to have slid around. Does the bow belong under your left ear?"

Margaret clutched at the offending bit of ribbon.

"My stock! I never thought of that!" She pulled the bit of embroidered linen till the bow was poised, with

outspread, fancy wings, directly under her piquant chin.

"Now, is that right?" she asked, looking up into her human mirror.

"Correct and trim as you please," he said reassuringly and watched her while she fastened the unruly stock with a tiny pearl headed pin.

"You wouldn't believe what a miserable half hour I have put in. I know now that odious old cat in the patent rocker has grinned afresh each time my stock sprang a fresh notch. Isn't it funny that women can't show a little Christian courtesy to each other?"

"Well," said the young chap thoughtfully, "I'm very sorry I didn't get here half an hour sooner. I might have saved you some—er—trifling discomfort."

But that wasn't what his eyes said at all, and Margaret woke with a start to a realization that, after having made use of the young man, it was not going to be easy to get rid of him. But what annoyed her the worst of all was the fact that she felt that she was not particularly anxious to get rid of him. He had put down his bags and settled himself back in his corner of the divan in a way that suggested that he meant to stay until New York was reached.

"Do you believe in signs and omens?" she asked.

"Sure! Something tells me this is going to be an awfully jolly trip. I usually dread the ride into town, but then—"

"Well, when I go home I shall say unpleasant things to the friends who advised me to take the boat trip down the Hudson. Oh, I didn't mean to be personal! I beg your pardon. I was merely referring to the babies and the lunch. I can't sit on the deck because the sight of lunch boxes and perpetual eating makes me positively ill."

"We'll remedy that. I know a little corner where they don't admit either babies or lunch boxes. If you'll just wait a minute I'll fix the matter up. I have a little stand-in with the captain of this boat."

He rose, but she laid a detaining hand on his arm. "You really mustn't!"

"Now, see here," he said frankly, "you're calling yourself all sorts of things because we haven't been introduced. It's all nonsense, don't you know. We were bound to meet after the conventional fashion some day. Something—er—tells me so."

It may have been that Margaret wanted to get out in the fresh air or it may have been because she felt it her duty to change the expression in his eyes which were looking at her so eagerly. He strode down to the purser's room and paid the price of the best stateroom on the boat, which gave them access to a tiny patch of deck room shut in on the other side by a lifeboat, a stack of life preservers and a most uncompromising railing. From this point Margaret viewed the beautiful panorama of the Palisades, and the young man, loyal New Yorker that he was, insisted that it was purely his duty to make his state show up at its best.

The last ten or fifteen minutes of the trip were uncomfortable ones for Margaret. Mrs. Grundy whispered in one ear that she had already been indiscreet, and it was her duty to drop the young man forever. Her sense of fairness whispered in the other ear that she owed him something for his courtesy.

As they gathered up their traps to disembark it was quite evident that the young man was not giving himself any anxiety over the situation. He took her checks. He even accepted Pedro as a matter of course. He led her the way to a hansom without asking her so much as where she was going. When she and Pedro were settled in the vehicle the young man stood with one foot on the step.

"Will you tell him to take me to the Grand Central?" she asked.

"I have already done so," said the young man placidly, and, without hesitation, he sprang into the hansom and sat down beside her.

Margaret was speechless, not sure whether she was glad or sorry. Was the young man trying to kidnap her, or was he a mind reader? She was certain she had dropped no hint as to her destination.

"You see, I knew you all the time. You are Margaret Trenton, and you are on your way to visit Etta Wilson at Rye Beach. I saw your name on your luggage."

Margaret looked at him in wonder. "Yes, but Rita! How do you know Etta?"

"Oh, she's my cousin! It was you I was looking for all the time. She had asked me to meet you on the boat if I happened to be coming down at the same time from the Merriam house party. I very nearly missed you because—because—well—that picture doesn't do you justice."

"Oh!" said Margaret, feeling somehow that there was nothing else to be said.

"I was going on to Newport for a week, but I think I'll stop off at Rye." Margaret's glance fell, and a slight flush spread over her face. The young man's lips twitched.

"I think you need me there—to let you know whether your hat is on straight."

Then they both looked at each other and laughed, and Pedro, in sympathy, pounded the floor of the hansom with his tail. It is so good to be young.

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