

FIRST DANCE

APRIL MARSTON stood at the neighborly opening in the hedge, her wide blue eyes wistfully regarding George Paulson. She drew a deep sigh. She could tell by the way he relaxed against the snowshovel that he was supremely untroubled by thoughts of girls or dances.

April was sixteen, an age recently attained. This arrival at maturity had automatically bestowed upon her the right to attend school dances—if asked. With characteristic recklessness she had hinted broadly to her girl friends that George was taking her to the dance Saturday night. April had been so sure that George secretly adored her as much as she adored him, so sure that he would ask her. But with only three days left, she was beginning to know panic.

April stepped lightly into the next yard. "Hello, George."

"Hullo," George said without enthusiasm.

There was something so seraphic about April as she stood there in a gray wool skirt, leather jacket, her hair escaping in a halo from under her Juliet cap, that no one would have suspected the predatory thoughts that crowded her mind.

"How come you're not shoveling, George?"

"I was thinking," he grunted.

"About me?" April moved closer.

"Of course not."

"I—I think it's mean of you to say it like that." April, looking like a chastened angel, perched on the one step he had cleaned.

"Golly," George protested, "you asked me, didn't you? Want a fellow to lie? Girls are nutty."

April ignored this ungallant thrust. "Then what were you thinking about?"

He waved his hand to include the universe as the scope of his mental meanderings.

"I'll bet it's basketball," April guessed shrewdly. "I'll bet you're wondering if

you or Butch Kelly'll get to start the game Saturday."

George scowled. "That's not so! What do I care if Coach has got it in for me. Let him start Butch and see how far they get. But, say, how do you know so much about it?"

April looked wise. "Coach has been dating my sister Grace." She watched George

sulkily trace a ridge in his brown cords, and she knew she had touched a vulnerable spot in his armor.

SATURDAY was the big game between Robindale South and Robindale Central. South had drubbed Central in the Thanksgiving football game. Never had one side made a clean sweep of both basketball

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Illustrated
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and football, and this year South was vociferously telling the world that it intended to accomplish the feat. Every loyal Centralite felt it a matter of personal honor to prevent this tragedy.

"George..."

"Huh?"

"Are you going to the dance Saturday night?"

"Golly, no! That's panty-waist stuff."

"Butch Kelly's no—well, he asked me to go," April said.

"Go ahead; see if I care."

The light of desperation was in April's blue eyes. Just the thought of being escorted to her first dance by ugly Butch Kelly made her want to cry. She choked down the lump in her throat and played her trump card. "I—well, I'll bet I can get Coach to start you Saturday."

George straightened, his indifference gone. Then he relaxed with a snort. "Think he'd listen to a kid like you?"

April bit her lip. "I don't know as Coach thinks I'm such a kid. He said last night I was a pretty cute trick." Watching George, she saw he was impressed. April didn't feel it was necessary to tell him that Coach had ruffled her curls with his big hand and laughed as he said it.

"So what?" George retorted.

April hesitated. Experience warned her that she was heading for trouble, but her

chin set determinedly. "George—if I got him to start you Saturday—would you—I mean, will you take me to the dance?"

George fidgeted. Instinctively he wanted to avoid such a compromising proposition. On the other hand, his honor was at stake. He said grudgingly, "Why, I guess so. But how'll I know you made him change his mind?"

April's hand rested lightly as a fallen leaf on his arm. "You—you don't think I'd lie to you, George?"

"Okay, okay, you fix it with Coach, and I'll take you."

April danced through the opening in the hedge, her eyes shining. Behind the angelic exterior a plan was already forming—a plan based on the glamour of her new dress bought especially for the dance.

It was a honey of a blue dress with slippers to match—slippers with wickedly high heels. It had an adorable swing skirt, and the accessories, she knew, were terrible sophisticated. April felt she looked awfully, awfully old in it.

AFTER SUPPER she begged off wiping dishes and hurried upstairs to put the dress on. Coach was young and terribly handsome and nice, she thought, as she dabbed her hair and ear lobes with perfume purloined from Grace's dressing table. She was sure he couldn't resist her woman's wiles. If only she could get a few minutes alone with him when he called for Grace.

As she came downstairs, her father murmured to her mother, "She looks almost as beautiful as you did, Cora, in your first dance dress. Remember, that was the night we met?"

Her mother paused in washing the dishes. "A girl never forgets her first dance, Roger. It—it's the biggest thrill of all..."

Pretty soon April heard her father leave for his lodge. The splash of the shower told her that Grace was not nearly ready. If Coach would only come early tonight. April waited near the door, her heart hammering. But when the bell finally rang, she managed to look calm and sophisticated.

Bob Evans grinned down at her. "So that's the new dress? You look beautiful, April."

April blushed, and hated herself for doing it. And yet she was happy that her glamour was working. She perched on the sofa by his side and rested her hand on his arm just as she'd seen Garbo and Dietrich do it.

"Are—are you really going to keep