

A Tall Tale

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IT all started many years ago. My father was a tall man, a very tall man. I remember reading with pride the inscription beside his picture in his college yearbook: "Dunny is long in stature and in mind as well." Though his intelligence could not be measured in inches, my father's stature measured six feet, three inches, and I thought he was the tallest man in the world. Then I grew, and I grew, and I grew; and suddenly I realized that the height which was so admirable in a man like my father was a distinct disadvantage in a girl like me. To this day I am unable to see any advantage in the extra seven inches which prevented my being a petite five-feet-two. Extra height, as far as I'm concerned, is a desirable characteristic only in men and the Empire State Building.

Whenever my shorter friends—straining from the tips of their three-inch heels to look into my eyes—remind me of the so-called advantages of my height, I can only reply that they speak from inexperience. This questionable distinction has been the frustration of my life from earliest childhood. I'm sure that much of the screaming I did as a baby in the hospital nursery was not a reaction to what the nurses termed "temporary discomfort" but merely my vocal protest at being tagged one of the longest babies ever born in the Chicago Lying-In Hospital.

All through my childhood my friends looked up to me, which wasn't too much of a disadvantage until I reached the age when I discovered that all of the interesting people in the world weren't girls. Because of the difference in the growth rate of boys and girls, however, most of these interesting people were still much shorter than I. There was one boy, the gangling, stringbean type himself, whose height automatically made him my first beau. He was the only boy in the class that I didn't look down on! But my romantic inclinations were squelched by this thirteen-year-old model of male glamour on the day of our graduation from grade school. Such an occasion called for a new dress, and mine was my first attempt at sophistication. Oh, my mother warned me that the long, flowing lines of its white fabric were much too old for me and would make me look taller. But as a thirteen-year-old siren I thought Mother had a lot to learn, and I insisted on that particular dress and a pair of sophisticated high-heeled shoes to go with it. The effect must have been towering! When I successfully maneuvered to a place on the platform beside my romantic giant, he leaned toward me with an embarrassed whisper, "Gee! That dress makes you look six feet tall!" And he thought it was a compliment! I hated him. It wasn't long after that incident that I shocked my father with the desperate announcement that if I grew another inch I'd kill myself. He wasn't

too upset, evidently, because he somehow managed to conceal his laughter in a sudden coughing fit, and he didn't even seem too surprised when I was still alive after growing another four or five inches.

My first humiliation didn't compare with the agony I experienced after I began taking men seriously. The only consolation I had was my sister's plight; she was even taller than I. We had another similar disfigurement, too, in our big feet. Whenever we reluctantly discarded our old shoes for a new pair—always a size larger—my father tried to ease the blow with some witty remark, "Oh well, girls, you'll have to go a long way to catch up with my size 14's." His humor failed to impress us. We thought our feet would never stop growing, and we made desperate efforts to hide them by curling our toes under in unbelievable contortions while twisting our legs around the legs of the chairs we sat on. We had another clothes problem, too. For years we had looked forward with anticipation to our first formal dance and a long, floor-sweeping formal dress. Unhappily we discovered that on us the formals didn't sweep the floor. In fact, they didn't even do a good job of dusting. Moreover we were forced to wear flat-heeled shoes to take off the inches, and anyone can see the lack of glamour in a froth of lace and net supported by size 10 "gunboats."

Sometimes when it seemed as though all the tall men had taken off for remote parts, my sister and I accepted blind dates. Other girls took blind dates on one condition: Does he have a car? For us the question was an entirely different one: Is he tall? My father observed that we didn't care whether the man in question was a criminal or a millionaire, just so he was tall. On these occasions we lived in a state of dread until the night of the date, with only the usually unreliable testimony of the person who had arranged the date to assure us that our partners would be of considerable height. We learned to avoid any arrangements made by a very short friend since her estimate of height was often made in relation to her own measurements, which obviously could be disastrous for us. At times like this we either sat the evening out, or resorted to a slouching posture resembling the lines of a question mark.

I remember one of my sister's blind dates. All during the day she had tormented herself with the question, "Will he be tall enough?" When the evening arrived and we finally caught a glimpse of her date, my sister turned around and ran out of the room, calling frantically, "I'm not going; I'm not going! He has a mustache!" Of course I knew that it wasn't the mustache; even on tip-toe he wouldn't have reached her ears.

One way or another I either slouched or sat through my dating days. Somehow height doesn't seem so important any more. I finally forgave my gradeschool beau, too, and we're looking around for some tall boys for our two daughters.