Puppets Come to Life

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By Naomi Geiger

IN A secluded booth in the Cyclone Cellar, Marcella King took a last hurried glance in her compact and excitedly poked an imaginary stray lock into place. What did Phil want to tell her? Gosh, would her sorority sisters be jealous if she showed up at dinner wearing his Delta Epsilon pin! With an ecstatic little wriggle, Marcella clamped her arms close to her body and edged over to leave just enough room for him to sit by her—if he would.

"Nice race, Phil. I hear you set a new Big Six record in the two-mile," called out a masculine voice as Phil Evans, captain of the cross-country team, strode through the Union Grill.

MARCELLA could hear Phil’s voice as he stopped a moment to chat. How casual and matter-of-fact it sounded! Perhaps she was wrong about what he wanted. It was the first time he’d ever asked her to anything except a dance—the first time they’d ever had a chance for a private chat. But when he phoned and asked to meet her after the race, hadn’t he suggested that she get as secluded a booth as possible because he had something “very personal” to tell her? He couldn’t mean anything else.

"Been waiting long?" queried Phil, sliding into the seat opposite Marcella.

With trivial comments on the race, the weather, and the Home Ec formal the previous Saturday night, Phil and Marcella impatiently waited until the waiter brought their coffee and grilled rolls.

"Well, Marcella," grinned Phil sheepishly, as he set down his cup, "I’ve decided that a senior needs to be tied down."

SHE’D been right! Marcella’s heart pounded; she put her hands on the table and leaned toward Phil, eagerly, joyously.
"As you've probably guessed," Phil continued, "when I was home last Sunday I hung my pin on Ann. Since you and I have been together quite a bit this fall, I thought I'd tell you before I announce it at the house."

Like icy pellets his words struck Marcella. Ann! He had mentioned her a few times. Marcella's mouth quivered slightly and her eyes burned, but she stretched her lips until they curved up and up like a smile. "Congratulations, Phil. I've been expecting it."

"Hi, Marcella! Hi, Phil! That was a peach of a race you ran this afternoon," exclaimed Norval Fuller as he craned his neck in search of a vacant table.

"Thanks, old fellow. Sit down and have a cup of coffee, won't you?" invited Phil. "W-a-a-i-t a second! It's five o'clock, and I was supposed to meet a rushee at five and take him to the house! Will you excuse me, Marcella? I'm sure Norval will be good company."

As Phil hurried away, Norval folded his long legs under him and sidled into Phil's place. Conscious that Norval was staring at her, Marcella casually glanced across the aisle. Was her expression giving her away? As his eyes continued to pry, Marcella slid her glance along the top of the table to her coffee cup.

"Don't you want some coffee, too?" she asked, her gaze wandering up past Norval's shoulders to his chin, down to the sugar bowl, and then—with her eyelids still warding off his searching eyes—to Norval's large, muscular hand, pressing the buzzer.

"Phil certainly has been trying hard to be nonchalant this week," grinned Norval. "I'll bet a cookie he hung his pin on Ann last Sunday."

"I'd been thinking the same thing, and I just made him 'fess up," fibbed Marcella. So Norval had known about Ann, too. Thank goodness she had resisted the impulse to tell her roommate she thought Phil was going to propose.

"I shouldn't have told; so not a peep out of you till Phil passes his cigars." Marcella made a desperate effort to conceal her agitation as she studied Norval. His familiar broad
face with its large crooked mouth and wide-set eyes wasn’t homely; it was—well, comforting.

As Norval continued his banter, Marcella propped her chin in her cupped hands, drawing strength and sympathy from his understanding face. Phil had never been really interested in her, but then no fellow ever had. What was the matter with her? It wasn’t her looks or her clothes.

“Norval, before you came to college did you daydream about all of the wonderful things you were going to do?”

“Oh, sure! I decided that I was going to learn to be a county agent so that I could go back to our county and organize a strong 4-H club—one stronger than Black Hawk County’s.”

“I meant like being popular, getting into the different honoraries, and being in lots of extra-curricular activities. Why, when I was in high school I used to dream about being valedictorian of my class and a Bomb Beauty!”

Norval’s eyes crinkled at the corners, but Marcella smiled ruefully, “My grades aren’t even high enough for me to make the Home Ec honorary, and I’m not popular enough in my own sorority for the girls to put me up for Harvest Queen, let alone being put up as a Bomb Beauty candidate.”

Norval’s steady look was reassuring, as though he was really interested in helping her.

“You should have kept better track of me,” reproved Marcella. “Why, after the first couple of weeks of my freshman year, I scarcely saw you until just before school was out last spring, when Phil and I started running around together.”

Norval reddened slightly, “Really, Marcella, I didn’t think you wanted me to. Somehow after I introduced you to May and Barbara, who helped you get in with the Alpha Kappa’s, I felt that you preferred to be left on your own.”

Marcella stirred at her coffee. She really had wanted him to leave her alone. She’d been afraid that his hanging around would hinder her “hobnobbing” with the really influential and prominent students.

Suddenly noticing Norval’s new wrist watch, Marcella exclaimed, “What a grand watch!”
“Like it?” asked Norval proudly. “I won it in the judging contest at the National Dairy Show.”

“That’s right. You were high individual, weren’t you! You’re really showing them they didn’t make a mistake when they selected you as outstanding Ag junior last spring.”

MARCELLA grimaced inside. She’d certainly been mistaken to think that Norval would be just a nobody country boy at college.

“Norval, you’ve never seemed to be making any effort to be popular, and yet you’ve won lots of honors. You were even elected chancellor of the Block and Bridle Club. How do you do it?”

“I don’t know, Marcella. Of course, I tried to help out when I could, but I’d never done anything particularly outstanding. I was just as surprised as you are when I found out about them.”

“That’s probably it. You’re always helping out, usually in the background, where you’re scarcely noticed.”

“I’d like to think you’re right, Marcella, but at least I’ve gotten more real enjoyment and satisfaction out of helping the different fellows than I have out of the honors—although I was thrilled to get them.”

Marcella studied Norval for several seconds and then said quietly, “I believe you really mean that.”

SLOWLY she looked up from her cup. “Norval, what do my sorority sisters think of me? You ought to know; you’ve dated quite a few of them.”

Startled, Norval glanced away. “Oh, they seem to like you okay. Of course, no one’s perfect.”

“You’re holding out on me,” accused Marcella, staring steadily into Norval’s eyes: “Please tell me the truth. I really want to know.”

“All right, but remember this is just what I’ve been told and probably greatly exaggerated.” Carefully smoothing out his paper napkin on the table, Norval went on, “Some of the girls say you are always asking favors of them and yet you resent it when they ask one of you.”

Marcella could feel her cheeks redden. She really should
have let Frances use some of the perfume Aunt Margaret had sent her from Paris, even if there wasn’t much; after all, she had worn Frances’ formal. She should tune her radio down when the other girls were trying to study, and it had been mean of her to refuse to take Nell to the nine o’clock train just because she liked to sleep till ten on Sundays.

LOCKING her hands together in her lap, Marcella steadied herself as Norval continued.

“Maybe they’re jealous,” conceded Norval gallantly, “but several of the girls say you are very friendly until you ‘get in’ with some girl who is more popular; then you have as little to do with them as possible.”

“It’s not true!” snapped Marcella indignantly, restraining an impulse to slap Norval’s face. Then her grimly set mouth and stiffened body began to relax. After all she’d asked for it, and, come to think of it, she had deliberately snubbed May and Barbara because of the inappropriate ‘get-ups’ they wore for clothes.

“Please go on,” she whispered hoarsely. When Norval didn’t respond, she suggested, “Tell me what the fellows think.”

“Oh, there isn’t much to tell—besides, Marcella, don’t you think I’ve told you enough for one day?”

“Won’t you tell me? Please!” pleaded Marcella, leaning toward him and maneuvering her head until she could look into his eyes.

“Okay, you win. But remember, I’ll just be telling you the worst.”

So the fellows did talk about her! A tear slid to the corner of her eye; she opened her eyes wider so that it would not roll down her cheek for Norval to see.

“One fellow says you’re snobbish. Do you remember the night that my roommate took you to the show?”

MARCELLA did. Eddy had taken her into the Rainbow Coffee Shop afterwards to get a sundae. Just when their orders came two of her best girl friends and their escorts sat down at a nearby table. She’d been terribly humiliated because Eddy’s cheap suit was shiny at the seams and hung like a hand-me-down.
"I suppose you were embarrassed because Eddy couldn’t dress as well as your rich friends,” continued Norval. “So you had to rush over to their table and explain. But how do you suppose he felt sitting there alone for ten minutes, watching the sundaes melt while you laughed and chatted?”

Marcella raised her empty cup to her lips and pretended to drink.

"The poor kid is working every cent of his way through school. He went without breakfasts for a week and a half to save enough money to take you to that show and treat you afterwards."

JABBING viciously at a partly dissolved sugar lump in the bottom of her empty cup, Marcella pressed her quivering lips tightly together.

"I’m sorry, Marcella,” Norval apologized as he raised his eyes to her.

Marcella opened her eyes wider and squeezed her hand until her knuckles ached, but the tears flooded her cheeks anyway.

"I didn’t intend to mention it, but—” Norval grimly pushed his finger back and forth on the table “—but Eddy was so broken up about it that it hit me pretty hard.”

"I’ve—” Marcella bit her lip. She mustn’t cry or Norval would think she was just a spoiled brat. “I’ve been a—blind idiot.”

Norval shifted his long legs with slow deliberation as he stared remorsefully at the table. “Don’t feel that way, Marcella. I was too hard on you.”

"I didn’t realize I was hurting Eddy.” Marcella glanced up wistfully from clicking her thumbnails. “I—I—well—I suppose I never really thought about him.”

NORVAL seemed to be waiting for her to go on. Slowly Marcella turned her cup around on her saucer. “I guess it’s no wonder I haven’t any friends here.”

“Marcella, please—well, I—I’d hoped you considered me a friend.” Marcella’s throat filled, and for an instant she stopped turning her cup.

At last she managed to whisper, “I do—now.”

“I’m glad, Marcella, for I—” he hesitated.
“You’ve made people seem—well—more human,” confessed Marcella.

“Ah! ‘Puppets Come to Life!’ That’d make a good headline,” grinned Norval.

With a half smile Marcella held out her hand. “Thank you, Norval. And do you suppose—if I try hard—that I might learn to be a human being, too?”

And Norval thought that she might.

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Search for Perfection

By Dorothy Dunkelberg

Why stand on tiptoe, arms outstretched, your hands With grasping fingers? Does that pearl entice You as it smugly rests in golden bands, The perfect sphere and setting so precise? Your head is tilted back; you cannot see The brilliant changing flash of sunlit snow, Or graying streaks that avariciously Creep in at night to smudge the twilight glow.

Your hands are clutching air; you cannot feel The bark of walnut trees, or hard green balls That hang from them in clusters, and conceal The ripening fruit within their sticky walls. Why let that globe of symmetry eclipse The treasure lying at your fingertips?

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