

Poor Little Big Girl

by M.B.

MARILYN sat, a consciously bitter smile on her lips, listening to the nagging of the waves on the beach and the shrill voices of children quarrelling over a bucket. And this time yesterday, she marvelled, I was so happy!

It had all begun last night with the business of trying on the new frock. Mummy had started it well before Christmas, but then hadn't got round to it over the holidays.

"Come, dear, just slip it on and I'll turn up the hem and you can wear it when we go to town tomorrow."

It hadn't exactly slipped on. Mummy had had her back turned looking for pins in the machine drawer and Marilyn had plucked and writhed in silent agony and then given an absolutely necessary heave. There was a betraying rip and then a silence in which you could hear the whole packet of pins drop. Marilyn, conciliatory, had dived for them and opened up another pathway to freedom.

"Darling," Mother had said, not particularly meaning it, "you're not a butterfly trying to break out of a chrysalis!"

"Sorry, Mum." She had stretched horizontal, her face warm from bending and from shame while her mother peeled the frock from her back with the disdainful expertise of a cook skinning a sausage.

"You can't have grown that much in three months," her mother had wailed.

Marilyn remained silent, wishing that a bottle labelled "Drink Me" would appear on the occasional table. After all, she couldn't very well grow any bigger.

Her mother pecked at the seams with the stork-shaped scissors from the work-basket.

"Now, if I let out these darts here and here and put a placket in—Try it now, dear."

Marilyn held her breath as her mother steered the garment round her anatomical danger points.

"There," said Mother.

Marilyn tentatively stirred a shoulder-blade.

"Careful," warned Mother.

"It's too tight everywhere!" Marilyn had yelped.

"I declare," said Mother, "you must be inches bigger round the hips than I am! That was a fourteen-year-old pattern."

Mother had held the hem and Marilyn had backed gingerly out, hands above the head in grotesque surrender.

"It's much too small—I can't possibly do anything with it. I'll have to give it to Mrs. Williams for Patricia."

"Please, Mum, not Patricia—" Marilyn wanted to begin, but what would have been the use? Mrs. Williams, with five daughters and reputedly a non-sewer, was as valuable in the neighbourhood as the hen-tin in a household which deplores waste but whose children will leave things on the sides of their plates.

And Patricia, a year younger and several sizes smaller than Marilyn, was the natural repository for Marilyn's out-gowns. But Patricia was inclined to be choosy, and Marilyn's frocks were never as dashing as Janet Martin's, for instance. But it's a pretty frock, Marilyn

elegised, watching her mother fold it away.

IT had been quite a struggle to catch the bus.

"Mummy," Marilyn had pleaded, "I can't possibly wear my pleated skirt. It's far too short and it looks so babyish."

"Would you like to wear my white blouse with it?"

"Mother, you don't understand! Nobody wears pleated skirts any more!"

"Then wear your uniform."

"You can't wear your uniform when it isn't a school day!"

"Then you'd better stay home."

"I'll wear my yellow."

"You can't—it's in the wash."

"I'll sponge it!"

After that you hadn't quite dared tell Mother that your shoes hurt. You couldn't possibly, Mother would maintain, take a five at twelve years old. She took a four.

"Which petticoat have you got on?" Mother asked suspiciously in the bus.

"My ordinary one."

"Not the one with a tear in?"

"Yes," said Marilyn, blithely.

"Really, dear," pursed Mother, "what if there were an accident?"

"Then it'd probably get torn worse."

"You're getting big enough now to take an interest in your appearance. Actually" (Mrs. Blackburn paused for effect) "I was thinking of buying you a new dress at the sales if we could see something reasonable—"

"Mummy, how spifficating!" (She'd never had a bought frock before.)

"—but I don't see how you can try anything on if you're not properly dressed."

"Mother, please!"

"—and I certainly wouldn't risk buying anything without trying it on, you grow so fast—"

"Please, Mother."

"We'll see."

"MAIDS", please." The lift rose effortlessly to the third floor, its movement synchronising with the rise and fall of the excited butterflies in Marilyn's stomach.

"Maids', Children's, Lingerie, Corset Salon," intoned the operator. Marilyn stepped ashore, tasting the significance of landfall. The ship sped on without them.

"Come on," said Mother.

Lovely dresses, and in spite of the sale tickets inviolable as debutantes. Daringly Mother manhandled one from its hanger and held it against her.

"Fifty-nine and six and it's supposed to be a sale!" hissed Mother conspiratorially. An assistant's head reared like a cobra from behind the hangers.

"Was it something for yourself, madam?"

"No, no," laughed Mother. "For the little girl. This one at 59/6. You haven't," she asked with spurious hope, "got the same thing in a blue? The chartreuse is a little old."

"For the little girl, Madam? I don't think we've got anything here to fit her. We only go to PSSW."

"Thank you. Come, dear." Once more the lift bore than upward.

"Showroom, Mantles, Millinery, Beachwear," chanted the liftman. But this time landfall held less sense of destiny.

There was an air of leisured enjoyment among the customers in the showroom.

"I thought they tore things out of each other's hands," said Marilyn.

"Ladies don't," said Mother. "Anyway, the sale's been going all week."

Certainly there were no unseemly manifestations of the will to win. Two women stood one on each side of the "From 39/6" rack taking turns to move alternate frocks along the shining inch or two of chromium freeboard, rhythmical as two draughts players who know each other's moves. Several women did a bored hands-turn at the circular stands, like parents at a playground turning the roundabout for the kids.

"There can't be anything left," said Mother.

"Ooh, I like that!" said Marilyn. She whisked the frock out at

a tangent from the circle and clutched it to her. Pale mauve, with black squiggles and little black bows marching in triumph down the front. The other women stopped, interested.

"Don't be silly, dear. Ridiculous!" Mother had said to the assembled ladies, "She wants me to spend five guineas on a frock for her and she's only twelve!"

The other women smiled vaguely, toeing an Emily Post line between discourtesy and involvement.

"Come on, Mother!" Marilyn hurried her to the shelter-belt of another rack. "You shouldn't talk to people."

"Don't be silly, dear," said Mother.

They inspected more and more roundabouts, but there was nothing like the mauve frock any cheaper.

"I don't think they've marked things down at all," said Mother disgustedly. "We'll go to Woolworths and get a dirndl that'll do you in the meantime."

The lift sank like a stone.

"For goodness' sake, there's no need to cry about it," said Mother, on the pavement, "you're far too big to cry in the street."

"It's because my feet hurt," sniffed Marilyn.

IT was crowded near the counters and Marilyn, gaping upward, tripped over a push-chair. "Lift your feet, dear," said Mother. But when they got to the back there was a kind of oasis where the frocks were.

"Just a cheap little cotton," Mother had said to the plump motherly assistant. "She grows so fast I can't keep up with her."

"My, she is a big girl," said the assistant. "How old are you, dear?"

Marilyn didn't answer.

"Twelve," said Mother.

"And a half," said Marilyn.

"Fancy that," said the assistant. "Still, I think all the children these days seem to be turning out whoppers. It must be this Plunket system."

"A wonderful thing, isn't it?" said Mother. "Such good work! And that Karitane Hospital! I was there with Marilyn—"



"You don't want to turn out all skin-and-bones like your mother"

If she starts saying Would-you-believe-it-only-three-and-a-half-pounds-and-a-head-the-size-of-a-teacup I shall scream! thought Marilyn. She opened her mouth—

"Absolute whoppers!" cut in the assistant triumphantly. "My sister's had a dreadful time trying to find a pair of shoes for my young niece—fifteen and takes sevens! Plenty of sensible shoes, mind you, but they had to go round for a week before they could find anything that young Hilda'd consent to be seen alive in!"

Marilyn smiled. Mrs. Blackburn said, "Fancy!" and shuddered.

The assistant held a frock against her. "Like that, dear? No, I think perhaps the next size."

"I'd prefer it on the big side, she grows that fast!"

"Mind you, my other niece Jennifer was enormous at your age, but she's eighteen now and fined down to a nice Size Fourteen."

Mother smiled hopefully.

"What size shoes?" asked Marilyn, dubious.

"Dieting, of course," pursued the assistant. "Still, I'd be a bit careful if I was you. You don't want to turn out all skin-and-bones like your Mother."

Marilyn whinnied explosively. The smile on Mother's face remained, but stiffened with frost round the edges.

"That's an S.W.," said the assistant, "and there's plenty of room. Just needs taking up a bit. Are you sure you wouldn't rather have the pink, dear?"

"Thank you, no," said Mother. "Come on, dear!"

Marilyn suffered herself to be led away. Mummy would probably not let her put black bows down the front. Still, better a Small Woman than a Big Girl.

Straight after lunch Mummy suggested taking the unfinished frock round to Mrs. Williams. "I can't bear to see it lying round," mourned Mother. "All that wasted work!"

"Very well," said Marilyn. She supposed Mother and the other neighbours liked to see things worn, especially by Patricia, who was much more the sort of

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