

**DANCERS
IN THE DARK**

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Dancers in the Dark by Dorothy Speare

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I

JOY NELSON came into the room that she was sharing with two other girls, at half-past four in the morning. She was tired. She had been dancing steadily all night; her new silver slippers were killing her; and she was not accustomed to being up late. She could hardly wait to take her slippers off and get ready to sleep for a few hours.

Her room-mates, however, looked as if repose were the last thought they would allow to enter their jazz-surrounded heads. They were sitting on the bed, smoking. She had pretended not to see them, until she realized that they were not in the least bit embarrassed. They had even offered her a cigarette!

"My word, you look shot," said Jerry. Jerry was a fascinating girl, Joy had decided. She was not pretty—she was more than that. She had what the erudite youth of the day would describe vividly as "something about her." Her dark hair was bobbed, and she had green eyes and a red mouth. Her nose turned up, her scintillant face was splashed with freckles; decidedly, she was not pretty; but she was fascinating. One never could tell what she

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was going to do next. Joy had seen her openly chewing gum in the Kappa Beta living-room. One of the chaperones had lifted her eyebrows. Jerry never missed a demonstration. In less time than it took to lift the eyebrow of censure, she had surrounded herself with a mob of laughing, delighted boys, and exacted a penny from each of them for the privilege of a chew at her gum. There was never a dull moment, with Jerry around.

Sarah was another sort. She had burst upon Joy in a flash of colour that rioted away analytical estimation. Such eyes, lips, cheeks—and wonderfully marcelled hair. Later, when Sarah's tools were set out on the one bureau, revelation had forced analysis. Yes, Sarah was undoubtedly a Woman of the World. She oozed sophistication at every pore. As crowning touch, she even had a gold cigarette case!

"Well, I *feel* shot," Joy said now in answer to Jerry's comment. "This is my first Prom, you know."

"So you have remarked, several times," drawled Sarah. "Let me give you a tip, my dear—I wouldn't admit anything like that so freely. Numbers," continued the highly-coloured one, "are dangerous. Now, as for me—I wouldn't admit that this was my first or my thirty-first."

"The last number is more your speed, old girl," said Jerry.

"But what is one to say?" Joy asked, stepping out of her dress. "Everyone is just lovely to me when I tell 'em it's my first."

The two on the bed exchanged glances. Jerry blew out a cloud of smoke. "That's one way of starting a conversation," she said generously.

Joy sat down on the floor and pulled off her silver slippers. Once freed, her feet hurt more than ever.

"Wait till you get callouses all over your feet," said

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Jerry. "Enough steady all-night dancing does it. After that, you don't mind anything."

Sarah considered the tip of her cigarette. "I wonder if those wrecks have dusted themselves off and gone home yet," she murmured. "We've roosted here long enough."

"I'll go out and potter around." Jerry put out her cigarette, threw it in the wastebasket, and was gone from the room in one fell swoop.

"The men have almost all gone home," Joy volunteered. "I was late coming up, because I looked for the chaperones to say good-night, but I couldn't find any of them."

Sarah smiled. "I guess you couldn't. They pull in at midnight. This life would be too much for them if they didn't."

"They pull in at midnight! Well, what are they for?"

"My dear, I've often wondered." She flicked her ash daintily on to Joy's cot. Jerry came bounding back into the room.

"They've gone, Sally! We can get away all right!" and she proceeded to pull on her evening coat.

"Why?" Joy stammered her amazement.

"We're going riding," Jerry explained. "We had to wait until our men had gone, because we're going with some others."

"There's just one thing!" Sarah had not stirred from her perch on the bed. "Are they too stewed for us to go with them, or are they only edged? I'd like to know before we start. I haven't any desire to drive over a hundred miles with a couple of boiled owls. Remember that time at Yale, Jerry——"

"I know—my back teeth are loose yet. Some smash. But this time they're taking a Freshman along who's been kept sober for the occasion, so you're safe."

"Oh, in that case," Sarah descended from the bed and

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allowed Jerry to press her into her evening wrap. "Good-bye, my dear—we'll see you in the morning."

As she watched them depart, Joy almost forgot how tired she was. Half-past four in the morning—and they were going riding. She limped over to the bureau and looked down at Sarah's tools. She had never seen girls like these. They did not seem to care what they did. And the way they talked—you could not pick out any one thing, but it did not sound *nice*, somehow.

But Jerry was fascinating—and one was never bored. Perhaps that was why they were all right. She turned off the light and felt her way back to her cot over a succession of wardrobe trunks and hat boxes.

Once in bed, sleep was impossible with the whirl of new events playing in kaleidoscopic glitter across a mind that was not used to so much colour and certainly not much glitter. Her first Prom. How thrilled she had been when Tom had asked her. Of course, there was no thrill to Tom, as she had known him all her life. But since she lived in a typical New England town where the always increasing numbers of boys were weary of trying to balance themselves against the always increasing numbers of girls, it was somewhat of an honour for him to single her out from all the rest. She had never been outside of Foxhollow Corners before. This was not as strange as it would have been had she come from any part of the country but New England. She had simply never made the occasion; nor had the occasion been made for her to go. Most providentially, there had been a very good boarding school in Foxhollow Corners, at which she had been a day pupil. And during the war there had been too much Red-Crossing to do, too much to keep her nose to the grindstone at Foxhollow Corners, to think of the travel that the enterprise of service might have meant to her. And

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this was her first Prom, and all the girls at home were green, simply green. Tom had taken some of them in times past and probably would continue to vary his program thus. "Don't encourage the girls too much," was his motto.

The first day of Prom had passed in a shimmer. The girls were, for the most part, strange, exotic creatures—something of Sarah's vintage—but the men were of varied types. It was odd, Joy reflected, that such different boys should all, or nearly all, ask the same type of girl. There was one man—one particular man—Joy was at the age where there always had to be one particular man in her dreams—and this man seemed to have stepped right out of them made to order. In the first place, he was the best looking man she had ever seen—tall and very dark, with eyes that, when he smiled, grew tender. Tom had said that he was "a big man in college," a star at football, and a "regular all-around prince." His name was Jack Barnett, and although he had no girl at Prom, all the girls seemed to know him. He had cut in on Joy several times, and she still tingled from the thrill of it. Every girl knows the taking-stock preliminary to sleep after a dance. "Did he mean that? Or was he only handing a line. Did I show too much that I liked him? And is it his move now, or mine?" Joy lost herself in a dream that the football hero had cut in on her again and wouldn't let anyone else dance with her.

She was awakened by a queer thumping noise. Pushing open her eyes, through a just-alive-to-the-world haze she saw Jerry doing handsprings about the room. Determined not to appear surprised at anything more, she sat up in bed and surveyed her with a thin glaze of calmness.

"Ow!" said Jerry conversationally, as she knocked up