

## POOR DADDY

Mother is too busy for anything, except that she is always taking on more jobs. She can do them, too, and it never matters whether they're something that Grandmother would call ladylike.

She practically built our new house, only it wasn't new when we moved into it. For about three months, turpentine flavor would show up in the butterscotch pudding, or Daddy would complain that he didn't mind not being able to use his electric razor while Mother was installing new wiring, but he would appreciate it if his other razor weren't used to skin insulation.

Mother wouldn't hear him; she'd be rebuilding the staircase, or something.

Eventually the house was finished, except for clearing out the garage so that the car could be kept inside, and covering the pipes in the new bathroom, and a few other things that Mother could do any day she had to wait for a pot roast to finish cooking. It left her with nothing to do, except teaching Sunday School and managing the Community Chest drive and seeing that Daddy changed his shirts and keeping up with her painting and the play she was writing.

Daddy suggested that she improve her mind, but Mother said nonsense. Daddy had all the mind the family needed. Daddy is fearfully learned about tribal customs and Yucatan culture and things like that. Besides, Mother pointed out that she had rigged her bookrack so that it would go on the vacuum cleaner as well as over the sink, so she was already improving her mind. What she needed was exercise.

Daddy invited her to go fishing, but Mother said it wasn't exercise the way he did it, practically urging the fish not to disturb him. Daddy said the fish got plenty of exercise and who was he to insist on all the benefits? Daddy talks that way because the freshmen laugh.

Anyhow, that's why we took up figure skating.

Not Daddy, just Mother and Junior and me. Daddy said he had tried skating once and he had weak ankles, just go ahead and enjoy ourselves. He took out a family accident insurance policy and forgot the matter.

I liked figure skating, all but getting your pants wet if you take a tumble. I know why they call that other sort dry ice; the kind you skate on isn't. Junior liked it because he could go slamming around, bumping into people and being a nuisance to his elders. But Mother took to it as if all her life had been preparation for this consummation.

She never was good at school figures; Mother's style can't be limited to a little patch of ice barely big enough for a figure eight. But dancing she loved she was doing tangoes and waltzes and beginning to boss things when our club organized an ice carnival, while I was still struggling with the Mohawk in the fourteenstep. The fourteenstep is the first dance you learn; I was hopelessly outclassed by Mother, not a desirable thing, except that, as a result of my difficulties with the Mohawk, Cliff came into my life.

A Mohawk is not an Indian and neither is Cliff. A Mohawk is a transition from front to back while passing from one edge on one foot to a similar edge on the other foot. That doesn't seem clear, anyhow you skate forward as fast as you can and suddenly turn and skate backward. All this while your partner has his feet crossed, and you are in a close embrace, and while turning a corner that you can't see. It would help to dislocate both knees. In fact, you can hardly avoid it. I explained it to Daddy and he said it didn't sound practical, except possibly in a wheelchair.

You may wonder why I persisted. Well, in the first place it was my battle with the Mohawk that caused Cliff to introduce himself and start teaching me. That was good. In the second place they say that love will cause a man to put up with a poor skating partner for ninety days maybe six months, if it's true love. That was bad. The way I figured it had a maximum of half a year in which to master that Mohawk or put Cliff out of my life and devote myself to good works.

That Mohawk nearly stopped me, but Cliff was very patient. He said the trouble might be the fit of my boots, and got me some heel liners. I finally learned it after a fashion, and Cliff went on to teach me other things.

The Mohawk never bothered Mother. She was past it and learning the cut-off in the fox trot, which is even trickier, and zipping through seven or eight other dance patterns. Mother never actually danced well, but she could dance and she could hold up her partner in a pinch. Mother is little but tough. I am more a Junoesque type. She developed a bouncy style of her own. Our club professional gave up trying to smooth it out and let her learn new things as fast as she wanted to, which was just as well.

In March Daddy came to see the carnival and the dance that followed. He complimented Mother on the costumes, which she had made, of course. But the dancing afterward gave him pause. Mother is very popular on the ice, even Cliff would rather dance with her than with me. I suppose that it should have made Daddy proud to see how the mother of his progeny was sought after, instead he looked thoughtful. He remarked that the tango should be restricted to married couples, or at least considered tantamount to an engagement.

Mother said pish and tush.

Daddy dropped in at the rink and watched the dancing once or twice after that. When school closed he left on a long fishing trip and didn't urge Mother to go along, which worried me, but Mother said he was accepting the universe. Usually Daddy makes the universe accept him. It seemed odd. The importance of a stable family background for the adolescent is emphasized in all the textbooks, as well as in the more interesting works on psychology Daddy means to keep locked up; I decided I had better keep an eye on things.

Daddy sent back cards postmarked Green Mountain Falls, Colorado, and some fish packed in ice.

When he got back he showed an interest in skating and borrowed Mother's Primer of Figure Skating. One evening when Mother, Junior, and I returned from the rink, Daddy put down the book and announced, Martha, I have concluded that figure skating is fundamentally simple.

Mother should have been wary. She said, Yes, dear? That's nice, and sailed out to throw dinner together.

Yes, he said, following her. It is simple physics, primarily the conservation of angular momentum, plus laws relating to the acquirement of reflex patterns; Figure skating may be learned rapidly by analyzing each move, then being sure to do it correctly the first time. Anyone of adequate mentality should acquire the art in a short time.

Hmm, said Mother. I suppose you can apply these principles you've discovered?

Certainly, Daddy told her. Skating is ordinarily taken up by the very young, whose habits of mental discipline are not formed. Or, conversely, by older people, but casually rather than systematically. I wish I had time to demonstrate it. However, the principles are clear from my analysis.

And that is why we all went to the rink the following Friday.

Mother started to pick out skates for Daddy. He waved her out of the skate shop. I shall do this methodically, he said. I'll see you all on the ice.

I've never seen Mother in such a dither. Your father is such a child! Maureen, you help him when he steps on the ice, the mood he's in, he won't let me. Oh, dear! I wonder if I still know how to apply a traction splint?

Probably be his head, rather than his leg, I offered. It didn't console her.

I didn't get a chance to help, as he was met at the ice by Miss Swenson, our club professional. I arranged by telephone for Miss Swenson's help, my dear, he said to Mother. With that he stepped down on his toe picks, just as it says in the book.

Miss Swenson flashed Mother a smile and said, Don't worry, I'll take care of him.

Mother said, Who said I was worried? and skittered off. She looked mad.

Miss Swenson towed Daddy to the pen where the bunnies practice. Then she said sweetly to me, Now, Maureen, go skate somewhere else. Just pretend your father isn't here at all. I can take a hint; I went back to my patch and practiced inside edges.

Mother joined me. Is he all right? she asked.

Probably. Miss Swenson hardly ever maims them.

I'll just skate down and see how they're making out.

I wouldn't, I told her. I got chased out. They don't want an audience.

Mother said, They'll be too busy to notice me. She came back with her cheeks red and started doing loops like mad.

Presently the music started for dancing. Mother had ducked into the girls room to restore her makeup and her confidence. The first dance was a fourteenstep.

Dad and Miss Swenson came out onto the dance floor. They actually lined up to start the dance with the others.

I closed both eyes. Dear heaven, I thought, don't let him do it. Oh, don't let him fall, they'll cut my poor Daddy to ribbons. The fourteenstep is awfully fast. If you fall down, it's just like being caught by traffic lights.

Finally I opened my eyes to see if I were going to be an orphan. Cliff skated up and said, Skate this one, Puddin'?

I said I might never skate again and tried to pick out Daddy. Finally I saw him, away down the ice. He was in the four-beat roll that carries you down the rink, and he was actually doing it, or sort of. I've seen circus bears that skated better, but he was still on his skates. I decided that Miss Swenson must be stronger than I'd thought.

There was still the corner to turn and it was coming at him. The ladies Mohawk may forever remain my bugaboo, but the men's Mohawk is no slouch, and it comes right at the turn. I got ready to identify the body.

Then he was past it and Miss Swenson was faking to cover up the extra steps he took. He turned the corner without even missing the beat. I wanted to cheer but my throat was dry.

Mother showed up. Where's your father, Maureen? she demanded.

I pointed. They were swooping down the ice, and Daddy's roll was deeper this time.

It was the only time I've seen Mother start to faint. She managed to control it, but I had to grab her to keep her from sitting down suddenly on some very wet ice. The music stopped and Daddy skated up alone. My dear, he said to Mother, this next is a tango. Would you essay it with me?

Mother grabbed him. Charles! she shrieked. Get off this ice! You'll kill yourself. I don't know how that woman could take you out in that traffic!

Quiet, my dear, said Daddy. I am unhurt. Will you tango with me, or shall I dance with my instructor?

You can't tango!

I have studied the pattern carefully. I expect to retain a semblance of the moves.

They tangoed. It wasn't good, but Daddy had not been woofing about memorizing the pattern. My own wasn't much better, I kept changing sides with Cliff at the wrong times, trying to watch.

We rode home in silence. I got Junior aside when we got home. What did you think of Daddy's skating? I asked.

Huh? Dads a temble skater.

Were you amazed that he could skate at all?

Why? was all I could get out of him.

I didn't discuss it with Daddy until three days later, because it took that long to collect facts. I tackled him privately. Daddy, I said, something is worrying me.

Well, Puddin'? Can I help?

Perhaps, since you are more experienced than I.

Easy now! What are you leading up to?

Well, what would you think of a person who deceived someone?

It depends on the circumstances. For example, deception is justifiable around Christmas and before birthdays.

Oh, I considered. I don't know what category this belongs in.

Well, spill it.

Very well, then. It says in your logic text that when apparent facts lead to contradictions, each alleged fact should be tested. I have reason to believe that the sort of fish you sent home are not found in the lake at Green Mountain Falls.

Who said they were? There are other places to fish.

I suppose so. It occurred to me that both Green Mountain Falls and Broadmoor are suburbs of Colorado Springs.

Go on.

Broadmoor reminded me of the figure-skating school at the ice palace there each summer.

Yes?

One conjecture led to another. I remembered that Miss Swenson teaches at the rink over in Centerville mornings, and that you don't have any morning classes at present.

Hmm... Did Miss Swenson show any interest in your conjectures?

Oh, Miss Swenson is incorruptible! But, Daddy, George at the skate shop is not so difficult. Cliff got him to recall that some skates were shipped to him from Colorado Springs recently. For five dollars he thinks he could remember whose they were.

Tell Cliff not to waste his money. What is your object in this snooping, young lady? Not something your mother thought of?

Oh, no, Daddy! Mother is baffled.

Then why?

At first it was just curiosity. Since then, however.

Yes?

After I had the facts, I still couldn't see the reason. Why the mystery? Come clean, Daddy.

He stopped to load his pipe. Put yourself in my place, Puddin. Suppose the girl of your dreams was being chased after by a bunch of young bucks who could cut didos on the ice. What would you do?

Why, uh, I'd learn to skate, I answered automatically. I was dazed. Imagine it! Romance, jealousy, at Daddy's age!

Yes, but not in public. It wouldnt do to go stumbling around with your mother hovering over me and explaining how I wasn't the athletic type and wasn't it brave of me? I had to impress her.

Oh. I see your point, Daddy.

I suppose that should have settled it, but I had one more thing in mind. Oh, Daddy

Yes, Puddin?

I'm glad you comprehend the crucial symbolic importance skating can have in relationships between the sexes, because then you will understand I stopped. I couldn't tell him anything about Cliff because Cliff doesnt know yet that he's going to marry me. Men are so complicated.

Daddy raised his brows. Understand what, Puddin? And where did you get all those big words? Not from me, I trust.

No, I mean, yes. I hesitated; this was going to be touchy. Well, to get to the point, Daddy, during my investigations I examined your skates. They're awfully nice. If I had Stanzione boots and Olympiad blades like yours, I might make marvelously fast progress myself. Of course, Id keep your gristy secret, I added hastily. .

Blackmail! Daddy said. Puddin, men have been shot at sunrise for less.

I suppose so, Daddy.

You are almost too big to spank.

I'm glad you think so, Daddy. It makes everything simpler.

I said almost. However, you're getting older and have heavier expenses. Suppose I raise your allowance. Then, if you need skates, Ill advance the cash and deduct it.

This is a private arrangement, Daddy?

He shook his head. Say anything you like. You will have to judge moral problems for yourself.

Daddy is such a lamb.