"My Best Girl"

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

SECOND INSTALMENT

SYNOPSIS — Maggie Johnson, whose father is a letter carrier, is the domestic drudge of the humble home where her mother does little except bemoan the fact that she has seen "better days" and her sister Liz, who works in a beauty shop, lies abed late. Maggie has to gets the family breakfast before she starts out to her job in the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Life scrambled along somehow in the Washington Avenue cottage, and almost every day there was a funeral somewhere worth seeing.

Minnie Johnson 16 years old, liked funerals.

"Mama'll give up the funeral of her oldest friend, if there happens to be a bigger one on the same day!" Maggie asserted delightedly. And yet she considered the dismal tendency as rather admirable in her mother, and when there were defective black gloves or veils or ribbons marked down for below cost, at the Mack, she always brought her mother fresh supplies of them.

This morning she parted from her father as usual, before the swinging doors of the general post office, to the much more inviting scene presented by the Mack.

There were life, animation, gaiety here. Maggie, penetrating to an adoreas basement room that smelled of disinfectants and face powder and wet towels and highly scented soap, found some forty of her associates surging about, changing their clothes and powdering their faces, gossiping, laughing and qurareling.

In the passage at the top of the flight of brick-walled stairs that led up to the store was a nail, and Maggie took from it, with the expertness of long usage, a handful of scraps of paper and began without further preamble the business of the day.

"Say, did they get a new boy in here in Jimmy's place? Where is he? Are you the new boy? What's your name? Joe, huh?" She had brought up with a bump, against a tall young man, and now she raised her blue eyes from her memoranda and smiled at him as she went on, "I guess you are the new boy? Joe Grant, huh? Were you workin' in a department store before? You weren't? Well, see here—these are stock orders. Ink, see? And silk boxes, see?"

He stood looking at her, bewildered his puzzled, mutinous eyes far above her small head, bent to study her notes.

"We might as well do the candy first, since they want 'em for the window, I'll hand 'em down to you and you check 'em off. Don't be any dumber than you can help, beeuz they're always in a rush for the night orders."

Enveloped in her preposterous apron, her small hands fairly flying, her crown of chestnut braids becoming slightly dishevelled, and her cheeks getting red with her exertions, Maggie Johnson was all superbly indifferent to what he might be feeling or thinking.

"Here—be careful with those boxes, Joe. If you spill this stuff you pay for it. What's the next? 'Matinee Habits'? Oh, those are chocolate bars—didn't you ever eat one? Gee, you are dumb!"

It was noon on the same day. There was a forty-minute interval for lunch, and the new boy was lounging, bitter, disgusted, against a strip of dirty, disfigured brick wall that had once been painted white.

Far above his head, the boy could hear the healthy one o'clock roar of the store, beating rhythmically, like the sea upon a deep shore.

He was away from it all for the forty minutes of his lunch "hour," but it seemed all to be with him still—the noise of it, the confusion, the horrible smells.

A gong, above him, behind him, somewhere up the wide, dirty, utilitarian brick steps that rose steeply between two marred and grimy white brick walls, rang twice. That meant that the second lunch shift was due to report upstairs and relieve the third. The boy heard it, but he did not move in its direction.

Instead, he took from his pocket a small folded yellow envelope of stout brown paper and looked within it. It contained money—three dollars, some cents. He had been working that long, when the store closed tonight. His pay was at the rate of twenty-two dollars per week.

He had dropped the tory envelope and was putting the money into his pocket when a sound in his neighborhood made him turn suddenly, at the foot of the stairs. He was not, apparently, the only occupant of the basement.

Backing cautiously out across the heavily wrapped bundles that were a dozen times the size of her small body was what he at first supposed to be a child. Once fully in view, he recognized her at once. It was Maggie.

"That was a job for you!" she said panting, explanatory, raising to his eyes as beautiful a pair of blue specimens as he had ever seen.

"What was?" he asked.

Her own eyes became slightly suspicious.

"Weren't you waitin for them ideel leaflets?" she asked.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about!" the boy answered.

"Didn't you hear the gong?"

"Sure I heard the gong!"

"Well, don't you know you'll get fined if you're not in your place when that rings? Here—take these," the girl said expertly, securing some dozens of small frying pans, all tied together by the eyes in their nickled handles, and cramming them into his arms. "We'll say we were after stock in the basement," she axplained rapidly.

She had loaded herself with kitchen brushes; now she started toward the stairway. "Follow me, an' I'll get us both out of it!" she promised, confidently. "Don't say a word, Joe, I'll run it!"

Joe, who was tall, found himself smiling as he followed her small, flying figure. She went up the stairs almost at a run. He kept close behind her with his own load of jangling frying pans. She stopped only once.

"Mr. Smith," she said in a business-like tone to a floorwalker who arrested her with a sallow hand. "me en' Joe here was gettin' out some stuff for the house furnishin's when the gong rang—will you check us in?"

Mr. Smith eyed her with suspicion.

"I thought I had you this time, Maggie," he observed drily, displaying a wrist watch.

"No, sir!" the girl answered sturdily, honest blue eyes on his face. "we was gettin' out stock."

"All right, all right," he said challenginely, "but who asked for them brushes and pans?"

"I don't know, sir. Someone just yelled down when I was finishin' my lunch."

"Well, I guess I'll just step over to the house furnishing with you, Maggie," the man said unpleasantly, "and we'll see if we can identify the order. How'll that do?"

When they reached that churning, convulsed department that was devoted to house furnishings, Maggie shouted,

"Say! Which of you girls got for frypans an' brushes? Me an Joe've got 'em here, anyway!"

"I done it! An' bring 'em in here, and next time don't set around down there doin' cross-word puzzles while you think it over, Maggie!" she said, rising at once to the girl's aid.

Smith, only half convinced by all this cheerful glibness, fired a parting shot.

"Looks like you've got thirty or forty of them pans here now, Mrs. Cullen."

"Well, here's the way of it, Mr Smith. There was a school teacher in this mornin'," Kate responded, "an' all was that she says her class in domestic signs—whatever they are!—wud need a hunder' of them—"

"My God!" Eugene Smith said under his breath, departing. It was never any use to go against Kate Cullen; he had never really scored against Maggie Johnson, either. The two of them together—!

Joe meantime stacked brushes under the counter, while Maggie, arranging the frying pans compactly alongside, exchanged the time of day with Mrs. Cullen.

"Pop's takin' that stuff that never had no label on the bottle; the stuff Ma got at an auction," said Maggie, in answer to the older woman's kindly inquiry. "They wear real well, you'd be surprised!" added Maggie, of the ten-cent window weights, to an inquiring customer.

"If they wear at all, you bet your life I'll be surprised," the customer, disenchanted, responded sourly.

Maggie was fired into sudden interest. Her eyes danced with a blue battle spark.

"We don't guarantee them for use as weights in private stills, madam, nor to fire at the old man in case of a fam'ly difference!" she explained, to the unconcealed pleasure of everyone within hearing.

"Get out of here, Maggie," Kate Cullen said. "An' you move along, too, Joe. The girls are very fresh nowadays," Kate added placatingly to the panting customer, "he'll get fired for that tonight."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," the woman said, mollified.

"What'd she do?" Joe began to demand blankly. But Kate Cullen's significant wink silenced him.

The boy went away. He found Maggie again in the feverde congestion of the teeming aisles. He gathered she was not a saleswoman—she was technically known as a "feeder," one of the several little drudges who flew back and forth with messages, carried notes, ran for fresh supplies of thread and combs and soap and toys and sheet music and bottles of ammonia and perfume and cod liver oil and beads.

"Maggie!—Maggie!—Maggie!—get Mr. Smith to sign this, tell him the lady's in a rush—it's an even exchange, Maggie! See if you can find them rubber puppets and lions—bring up a whole lot. Where's Maggie? She was goin' to—"

She got more tired, more pale, more miserably draggled-looking as the endless afternoon were down to winter dusk, and the lights flamed up everywhere. But she never stopped. She was merely a pair of willing feet, a pair of tireless hands.

Only once did she speak to Joe that afternoon, and then it was merely to say: "Don't be a dumbbell, you poor dumbbell!" As the gong struck six, she appeared beside him at the top of the basement steps, and said:

"That's dinner. We have forty minutes. Did you bring anything?"

"Dinner, I mean," Maggie explained patiently, kindly. "We stay open until ten Saturdays, in December."

"Oh, my goodness," Joe said simply.

"Lissen," said Maggie. "Go over to the fountain an' get a bottle of milk—it won't cost you nothin'—we can have all we want Saturday nights beeuz it sours, do you see? Then come down where I was this noon."

Joe found her in the basement a few minutes later, when he went down carrying his own bottle of ice-cold, beaded milk, into whose deftly opened top the soda-fountain girl had stuck two straws.

"We ain't supposed to come down here," said Maggie, "but come in through here, an' I'll show you what I found out the other day."

Joe moved cautiously after her toward a large open window that was concealed in a dark corner on a shaft.

Maggie went through it like a rabbit, and he followed, into a small, cemented place, down at the foot of some twenty stories of rising shaft, laced, after the first floor, by the open balconies of fire escapes.

Opposite them there was another window, also open, and into this Maggie scrambled, without so much as a backward glance or word for him. Joe followed her. There was no witness—he and Maggie were apparently unobserved and forgotten.

She had preceded him to a sort of room built by the walls of piled mattresses, mounting in stacks up almost to the roof of this neighboring basement. The girl seated herself comfortably, her small legs stretched out before her and the bottle of milk and cardboard box of supper she had been carrying arranged conveniently to hand.

"Isn't this grand?" she asked, with a long sigh of satisfaction.

Three walls were made of mattresses, rising high about them. The fourth was that space of brick punctured by the high area window. Joe, grinned an appreciative agreement.

"This is the basement of the Diggins Deepweet Mattress Company; it backs onto the Mack," Maggie explained. "We're on Eighth, they're on Ninth—this is one of their storerooms. I found it last summer. If I should drop off to sleep for God's sake wake me up! I mean it. I'm not swearin', Joe." There's a lot of sandwiches and broken biscuits there that was in the bottom of a bucket. Stale bread is better for you, anyway. We oughter have a green vegetable, but you can't balance your diet on Saturdays—"

"How do you mean, balance your diet?" he asked in amazement.

"Don't you know about diet?" she demanded.

"Well, something," Joe admitted with his mouth full. "But I didn't know that you did."

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

MAY START HOME GARDEN WITH A FEW CIGAR BOXES

If the hotbed cannot be prepared in time or is unavailable for any reason, the early garden may be pushed to a good start by using window boxes. A half dozen cigar boxes will start enough plants of cabbage, lettuce, peppers or tomatoes for the first plantings in the average garden.

"It is not so important as to how the start is made but it is most important to make the start for an early garden this year," advises E. B. Morrow, extension horticulturist at the State College. "One of the commendable increases in food crops last year was by the farm garden or truck patch route and since we have been called upon by the Governor of North Caolina to lead the way in relieving the present economic distress there is no better method than by using the home garden.

As a further suggestion Mr. Morrow advises ordering the supply of garden seed early in January. If postponed too long, seed or favorite varieties may be exhausted. It is a good idea to try some of the new varieties each year but the horticulturist says it is better to stick to the old standard varieties for the main garden until such time as the new ones prove to be better than the old.

Plan the garden for the whole year, is a third suggestion made by Mr. Morrow. It is well to have down on paper just what will be done with the plot until next Christmas. It is never possible to follow a plan in detail but when one knows how, when and where, half the battle for a successful farm garden is already won.

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An Unpleasant Subject

All of the functions of life are not pleasant to consider. Perhaps this is why some mothers refuse to think that such symptoms as restless sleep, loss of flesh, lack of appetite or itching nose and fingers in their children, can be caused by round or pin worms. Many mothers have proven, however, that a few doses of White's Cream Vermifuge, that sure and harmless worm expellant, will make these symptoms disappear. You can get White's Cream Vermifuge for 35 cents per bottle from

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