

"My Best Girl"

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

FOURTH INSTALMENT

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 get the family breakfast before she starts out to her job in the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store.

There's a new boy at the store, Joe Grant. He tells Maggie that he has been assigned to work as her helper in the stock room. He seems rather dumb, but Maggie helps him through his first day at the store and shares her lunch with him in a cubby hole of a place that belongs to a mattress factory next door to the Five-and-Ten.

They are looking over some cheap picture cards. One of them has a motto that strikes Maggie's fancy. "The way to begin the ideal life is to begin." She and Joe talk about that and Joe is surprised that the girl has higher standards than he had suspected. When he goes home that night he is thinking about Maggie. And his home is the home of the owner of the Mack Five-and-Ten-Cent Stores, though Maggie does not suspect that he is the boss' son.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"What with Uncle Tom?"
"With Uncle Nobody! It's a sort of underworld investigation. I got it on my own hook."

"Well, you talk nonsense," the woman said after a pause, somewhat at a loss. "Your father won't permit you for one instant to give up college and work here."

"My father told me he wasn't going to have me financially any more," Joe said. "Meanwhile, I'm working with college and I'm working, and he can make what he likes of it."

"Well, he'll not change it any more," the woman said. "Meanwhile, aren't you going to the Russell's? It's Lillian's coming-out party—she'll certainly expect you."

"I think I'll go to Lillian's myself to sleep tonight," the boy said lazily. "My job has sapped my energies—what with college and post cards and tinsel and vegetable knives."

"What are you talking about?"
"Nothing. Nothing. But I'm a working man now, so time for frillities. Leave me be, Mother. I'm dead."

There was a silence. The word sat puzzled and disapproving, thinking.

"Listen, Joe, you do like Lillian, don't you? She's such a nice little thing," his mother presently began sentimentally, "and she likes you so much."

"Give her my love and tell her I'm trying to get together enough money for our little nest," said Joe. "I'll see her at the club tomorrow, anyway—she always plays golf Sunday mornings."

"I don't understand you, Joe," his mother said in cold amazement. "You went out of the house yesterday morning wild because your father had said he'd take you out of college if his spending of money went on. Now you say you've got a job and don't want to go?"

"I'm reformed," Joe said joyously. "The old man called me names this morning. It's just possible—it's just possible that some day I'll have the laugh on the old man!"

"I wish you'd stop talking nonsense, and follow me over to the Russell's," his mother said impatiently. "I don't know what they'll think if you don't come."

"Tell them I've had a change of heart—I've got religion," Joe said indifferently. "Tell them the way to begin living the ideal life is to begin."

"To begin what?" sharply asked Lillian Spencer Merrill, wife of the owner of the Mack Merrill Chair Stores.

"Just that, darling. The way to begin living the ideal life is—to begin," said Joseph Grant Mackenzie Merrill mildly.

Mrs. Johnson, born Petheridge, cherished in herself, and planted in her daughters, an unbounded sense

of righteous pride. The Johnsons had no pride and no particular cause for pride, she said.

But the Petheridges, and their collateral lines of Larkins and Lawrences! Ma told them thrilling tales of Granma Larkin's sampler, hung above the Petheridge's fireplace in the magnificent Petheridge home "down South," and about the Johnny Yanks mashing on all Granma Larkin's cut glass, and about the slaves—hundreds of them, thousands of them, all singing and dancing and happy, not at all any more wanting to be freed than so many irresponsible snarrows!

Pop, meanwhile, miserably regretted not only the low-born Johnsons, but the entire ranks of the Johnny Yanks as well. He would cringe while Ma was endeavoring upon this topic, and nervously clear his throat. And whenever he spoke of Vermont families, Ma said with her rich, unctious laugh, "Makin' wad en nutmegs, I suppose?" and she said had to laugh, too.

Not that Maggie was not loyal to her father; she had no heart in the laughter. Ma so often directed against him. But it was simpler all round to laugh.

No one going against that particular current, there were too many others to struggle with, if one were to struggle at all!

Often, when Maggie and her father were alone, he would give her a fairer idea of the case.

"You see, dearie," Len would explain in his mild, uncomplaining voice, "Ma's just quotin' things she heard when she was a little girl. She saw your great grandmother's house, with those samplers and things. Your mother can't remember nothing about slaves and all that. I don't know as her folks ever had slaves, anyway. They lived right in East Street, and they had a drug store—I don't know just what they would have done with slaves!"

Sometimes Pa would ramble on to the other side of the ancestral picture, to his own boyhood on a Vermont farm.

"I surely would like you to see the place some day, Maggie. There was eight of us boys, and my sister Margaret—you're named for her, and for my mother, too. There's some of them there still. I daresay—I haven't heard for twenty years. You'd like your grandmother's kitchen—winter or summer, that was the place us boys liked to be! I remember when a big storm would be coming up—trees bendin' over, and planks rattlin' in the yard, and the old well-sweep creatin'—how we loved the kitchen then! There was a big open fireplace one side, but she had her range built right across it, and there wasn't never a drop of anything spilled on that range—she kept it like black glass."

"Oh, Pop! But why did you ever come away?"

"I d'no, Maggie. Jest got restless, I guess."

"Look here, Pop. If my grandmother Johnson had nine children and no servants, how could she manage to keep the place so clean, and the stove shining so, and everything?"

Ma says that no lady ought ever to do her own work, and she says it can't be done!

"Well, maybe your grandmother Johnson wasn't a lady, Maggie."

"Pop, do you think there's any hope in not a lady? Not like my grandmother Petheridge? Not like my grandmother Petheridge, I mean? Because?"

Maggie would rush on eagerly. "I'd love to have my kitchen always clean and orderly, and pres-eating on the windowsill, and jam all put up, and me in a nice clean gingham dress—and a big stiff white apron, sitting down on the side porch, looking like you said Granma Johnson always did. And I would like to believe in all those newspaper budgets, and system, and having a regular hour for everything," Maggie would conclude, expectant eyes on his face.

"Well, I don't know, dearie. Your mother hasn't real good health, you know. And your sister has to keep her hands nice."

And then, of course, we're poor folks, Maggie. When you have to do without things—"

"Pow, we're not poor! Why, you

and I—make more than two hundred a month. Pa. And there's budgets as low as one hundred!"

"Two hundred a month for four folks ain't much these days, Maggie, when everything's gone up so high!" It was the automatic protest.

"But, Pop—those budgets, and the lists the government sends out, and the newspapers and the magazines know how things have gone up, don't they?"

"Dearie, your Pop ain't much on mathematics," Len would say, passing a weary hand over his troubled forehead, shaking his meek, gray little head.

Ma, approached on the subject of household reform, had much to say and very, very little to do.

"When I and your pop was married, beef was fifteen cents a pound! I remember that, because I said to the butcher, 'Ain't that a lot?' I wasn't nothin' but an innocent child."

"I'd never done any work with my own hands before. 'Keep them little hands like flowers,' our old doctor, Dr. Lovelace, use to say. He was a Southerner, too."

Maggie only listened respectfully, feeling that if beef would go down to fifteen cents a pound again, everything might be well. Meanwhile, the kitchen grew shabbier and shabbier, and water and grease and ashes darkened the shippit' floor, and the plates were piled in the sink, and the faucets dripped on them unavailingly.

She had found room for the ideal leaflet that Joe had given her on the crowded shelf above the sink, and sometimes she looked up from the dishpan at it, with wondering eyes.

"The way to begin living the ideal life is—to begin."

Her mother said that it didn't seem to her to make sense. "Lizabeth read it once, suspiciously and then forgot all about it. But Len and Maggie discussed it more than once, in some bewilderment. Len said frankly that he didn't "get it."

There was no hot water, and nobody in the world could wash the plates after a lamb stew dinner in cold. She piled them and scraped them while she waited for some water to boil.

"Maggie! This was her mother, from bed. 'Liz go out!"

"Ten minutes ago, Ma."

"Well, here's all there is to it," said Mr. Johnson. "I'm at the end of my green, and I can't do no more leaves until I get some. I guess you are tired, ain't you?"

"Not so very."

"You'll have to get the money from your father, Maggie!"

"Pop, have you thirty cents?"

"I guess so." He counted it out: dimes, pennies.

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Philanthropist Passes



Nathan Straus, one of New York's greatest merchants, who devoted his life and his fortune to aiding mankind, died at 83.

"Will two be enough, Ma?"
"How much did your father give you? Thirty cents—yes, that will be enough, but I would like to know what Len Johnson does with his money! Shut that door!"

Dishes waiting, kettle so slow to heat, crumbs on the floor, butter spoiled and dried on the stove, the red tablecloth crumpled, the sugar bowl upset, dish towels stiff with grease and water—no matter, the inspiration of it went before her like a banner, as she ran down the dark street.

"The way to begin living the ideal life is—to begin."

"Joe," Maggie asked, a day or two later, "how could you live the ideal life if nothing in your life was ideal?"

"Ah, there's the catch," Joe answered airily.

"The meaning of that ideal life is—"

You're—you're all in your own mind, do you see? What you have doesn't matter. What you think and what you are is everything—and what I think it all is!" he added sneeringly to himself. "Do you get me?" he asked aloud.

She did not get him at all, but she nodded.

"You must make everything beautiful in your life," Joe said, encouraged by her attention. "An old plate, for instance, an old stain on the wall. Why, Maggie, the museums of Europe are full of them—old plates and ragged clothes and worn-out rugs and water stains, and everyone thinks they're beautiful! The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, for instance. Did you ever hear of that?"

"Michelangelo did it," Maggie said nodding.

"And how did you know that?"
"Oh, we had it in school, an' then we have 'em here, among the fifteen-cent classic colored reproductions," Maggie replied.

"Well, all these old pictures are dirty and worn, mouldering away—all the old palaces are, lots of the books, all the furniture—and yet persons swear over there every year and admire them," said Joe. "Now, the point is, suppose you had to live with a lot of rotting furniture, and chipped plates, and you just said to yourself, 'These are beautiful and valuable relics—'"

"You mean that cups and chairs and ben' poor an' tired really have nothin' to do with the way you live?" she asked, coming nearer to it than he had, as he recognized somewhat to his surprise.

"You've got it," he said.

There was vision in her uplifted eyes, as if the walls of the mattress factory, where they were sitting had faded away, and new dreams of rare beauty and fitness and purity had risen before her inner sight.

"Joe, nothing could stop that if you once got it!" she said in a whisper. And then, half to herself, "I can't wait to get home and begin!" And after a while she said wistfully: "Joe, I wish I knew as much as you know."

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

NOTICE OF ADMINISTRATION

Having qualified as administrator of the estate of Wyatt Hayes, this is to notify all persons having claims against estate of said deceased to exhibit them to the undersigned within twelve months from date, otherwise this notice will be pleaded in bar of their recovery. All persons indebted to the estate will please come forward and make settlement.

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