



My Best Girl

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By
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Third Installment

Maggie Johnson, whose father is a letter carrier, is the domestic frudge of the humble home where her mother does little except housework and her sister Liz, who works in a beauty shop, has asked 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 Five-and-Ten, 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 cozy little hole of a place that belongs to a mattress factory next door to the Five-and-Ten.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"Oh, sure I do! I read it in a paper," she said, beginning on her own milk, and talking through, or around, the straw. "You have to eat iron and starch and—ah! fosters," she said, somewhat uncertain of the last word. "Iron and starch and—what?" he asked, fishing for the extraordinary word. But she would not be baited. "All sorts of things," she said evasively. "These sandwiches are tuna fish and egg—they're always the ones that are left. We never get the chicken or ham ones, but we don't care, do we?" she ended a little anxiously. "I don't!" Joe said, ravenously. "How'd you happen to find this place?" he asked, approving of it. "I was after some ideals in our basement," she said. "An' I seen this window. Ain't it nice in here?" "You were after some what?" he interrupted.

"Some ideals. Some of them little—well, sorter prayers they have all coloured up, on cards," Maggie explained. "Like 'No man is useless while he has a friend,' an' 'To earn a little, to spend a little less,' an' 'There's so much good in the worst of us.'" she went on. But at such lightning speed that Joe could not make a beginning or an end to what she said. He burst out laughing. "You laugh like you were much older than you are," said Maggie, at a sudden suspicion. "I'm almost twenty," Joe said. "Why—how old did you think I was?" "I thought you was a kid," Maggie said frankly. "That's," she ended innocently, "that's why I sorter took an interest in you." "How old are you?" Joe countered. "Are you thirteen?"

"Thirteen!" she echoed, affronted. "I've been workin' four years. I'll be eighteen my next birthday. I was seventeen last Valentine's Day!" And suddenly both were embarrassed, and they stopped talking, in some confusion of spirit. "But when I first went to work," Maggie resumed, "I was awful little. I opened a door an' checked umbrellas. You'd wonder they let me in at all. Three dollars a week, they paid me." "Pretty tough!" Joe commented sympathetically. "Oh, I've had my share!" she responded. "We ought to have something green with this," said Maggie again, extending toward him a fresh supply of the brokea biscuits. "Where'd you get all this diet stuff?" Joe asked, diverted. "Oh," she flashed carelessly, "the evenin' papers has it, always, a health column."

"But you don't believe all you see in the papers!" Joe teased. "I do some things," Maggie countered uncertainly, after a moment's thought. "And do you do all the things the papers say to do?" Joe asked. "I'm doin' one now," she answered, moving only her lips. "I'm relaxin'. Relax ten minutes after meals, if you're thin. Stand if you're fat. Exercises every mornin'—"

"We have twelve minutes," Joe said, glancing at his wrist. "And do you believe all the ideal cards, too?" he pursued. "How do you mean?" she asked. "Well, don't they all have rules for life on them?" Joe suggested. "I lost my forget," and "I am the captain of my soul" and all that?" "Was you readin' them to-day?" she asked, surprised. "No. But I know that kind of stuff!" "Let us then be up an' doin'!" Maggie was murmuring, as if she heard the words for the first time. "Laugh, an' the world laughs with you." "Oh, gosh, it makes me sick at my stomach!" Joe said faintly, between a laugh and a groan. Maggie laughed, puzzled but sympathetic. "It sorter doesn't mean anything," she conceded. "But the 'Si sezses' are funny," she submitted doubtfully. "The what's?" "The 'Si sezses'—we call them that," she elucidated. "They all begin, 'Si sez.'"

"Bunk!" Joe commented disgustfully. She was staring at him, faintly suspicious. "Joe," she began after a moment, "is this your first job?" "What makes you think it isn't?" he parried. "Becauz—becauz fellers of nineteen don't usually begin on what you're doin', stockroom work," said Maggie,

"specially when they talk like you do." "I worked on a farm awhile," Joe said. "And I traveled with a circus and worked in a bicycle shop," he added imaginatively. Maggie was satisfied. She reverted to a more interesting topic. "My mother says that all that newspaper stuff about budgets and systems and all that is the bunk," she offered. "My sister has to keep her hands white becauz she demonstrates a beauty cream, and my mother don't get round much." "But my mother don't like Liz to use make-up—and she won't let me cut my hair—she says it ain't ladylike for girls to bob their hair."

"The way to be in livin' the ideal life is—so begin," she read slowly. "Father living?" Joe asked. She hesitated. "My father's a—a wonderful man. Yes, he's living."

"What's his profess—what's he do?" Joe asked. "He—he's a travellin' man." Some how she wanted Joe to advise. "P-p-p—and my mother's—d-d-d-d," said Maggie delicately. "Well, I'll tell you one thing," said Joe, as they began to gather up the signs of their visit and prepare to return upstairs to the store. "I'll tell you one thing—I wouldn't like your sister."

"Oh, Joe, why not?" "I don't know. I just know that. And here's another thing, that budget and system and economy talk is all true." Maggie's beautiful blue eyes widened almost as if in pain. "Oh, Joe, I don't believe it!" she said again. "He was cross." "All right, don't believe it. What do you think the newspaper print it for?" "You mean so much for groceries and amusements and clothes and don'tists?" she demanded, arresting him with a small clutching hand on his arm. "Certainly!" "She seemed to droop." "My mother'd never do it, though! She hates managing."

"Well, because your mother wouldn't do it, Maggie," he said unpleasantly, "doesn't make it less true, does it?" "No," she said, adly, briefly. And Joe suddenly felt a hand on himself. He gave her a steady hand as they scrambled back through the two windows, and over the bales and boxes in their own basement, just in time to hear the gong emit its sharp double ring. But once again in the roar and rush of the store upstairs, he noted that she did not quite restore him to the familiar footing upon which he had been before.

At ten o'clock two old women, armed with pails and mops, made their appearance far at the back of the store, and purchasers began to take on a slightly apologetic note. Then, suddenly, a gong struck, and a hundred saleswomen were jamming through the black back passage, past the enormous service elevator into the wet street. Joe, stooping toward a heap of rubbish that was advancing steadily ahead of a charwoman's wide broom, picked something up and cut through the crowd to follow the sudden little coated figure that was Maggie Johnson.

"Here," he said, handing her a bent card. "I just found this. It was thrown out. Since you believe everything the newspapers tell you, how's this?" "The way to begin livin' the ideal life is—so begin," she read slowly. And she looked up blankly. "Begin what?" she asked. "That's all there is. It don't finish it." "It's all bunk," he said, trying to laugh. "Well, I don't know, Joe!" she answered, with a flash of animation crossing her pale, dirty little face. "What you said to-night made me kinder wonder. I've been doing all these things about eatin', and exercise, and washin'," she said eagerly, "but I guess this thinkin' is just as important. I've been handlin' them ideals, and crawlin' over them, and hearin' about them for three years, an' to-day's the first time I ever really looked at one! I guess you're tired,

Joe," she added, concernedly, as they walked toward the corner together. "Next week won't be so hard. An' I guess it felt pretty good to get that pay envelope to-day, didn't it?" she asked encouragingly. "Sure, it did," Joe answered briefly. "Do you go up?" the girl asked. "I live on Goat Hill over there—my father waits for me at the corner, Saturday nights!" "I live down the island," Joe said. "The ideal life—oh, my God!" he said, thinking of the hard job she had left of the sort of home to which she was probably going. "You've got a fine chance to lead the ideal life, Maggie Johnson!" Joe said with a bitter laugh.



He turned abruptly and walked a hundred blocks westward, glancing behind him to be sure he had escaped the long-going tide from the Mack. And in the second block, he stopped bent at a hand-one roadster, parked before a row of unpretentious homes. He got into it, fished a key from his pocket, and opened the door. The engine purred, the big car moved slowly out from the city, passed the parks and the factories, district and the scattered lights of the humbler suburbs, and so came to the splendid trees and the great walls and gates of Elm-bridge, home of the richest and most influential men and women of that particular part of the world.

In between certain magnificent posts of stone and brick went Joe and his car, and to the side door of one of the most imposing of all the mansions there. An elderly butler, admitting without question the dirty and weary stock boy of the Mack, ventured so far as to lay an eager, welcoming hand on his arm. "Mr. Joseph—sir! I'm glad to see you back safely, sir. What with—"

he coughed delicately—"with what the little missus—yesterday morning, sir, and I don't—your very emphatic remonstros to me, sir, on the subject of your parents'—eh—attitude, and then your not returning last night or today, either for luncheon or dinner—"

"I'm all right, Al'n, and you were a brick to be on the job to let me in. I'm late because I got a job." "You mean you really are working, Mr. Joe?" "I mean I really am." "You're not going back to college, sir?" "Not on your life!" "Why, but look here, sir," pleaded the older man, distressed, "your father never meant a word he said yesterday morning nor your mother, either." "Allen," Joe interrupted, slipping his arms into the dressing gown the man held ready behind him, "can you keep a secret?" "Anything you told me in confidence, sir—" he began reluctantly. "Well, then listen. I've got a job in the Mack Merrill Department Stores—the Eighth Street one."

"A job in the Mack Merrill Stores, sir?" The butler was actually pale. "In the office, sir?" "In the office nothing! In the shop. Carting wall papers and ink and cleaning brushes and earrings around the place. I'm going to show my father that he can't stand me up in a corner and throw mud at me! He can't call me a thief and a liar—"

"Mr. Joseph, sir, he never called you that—I didn't hear that," the horrified old butler interrupted. "Hear him! Everybody in the neighbourhood heard him! No, sir, he doesn't get away with it!" said Joe. "Now, you run along, Allen, and keep mum, and tell 'em I'm all right and I'm home!"

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