



My Best Girl

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

FINAL INSTALLMENT

They could hear the rending, grinding sound of Maggie sobbing bitterly, deeply, as a child sobs and as if her heart would break.

The three exchanged glances, and presently, Elizabeth said slowly: "It seems like we have the worst luck of any family in this city."

Her mother took the theme up readily.

Pop, up to this point, had been silent, as Pop generally was.

Now, suddenly, he rose to his feet and dashed to the ground the striped tea cloth he had been using as a napkin.

"Maggie!" he shouted. Immediately she was in the kitchen.

"Maggie, we've had enough of this!" said Leonard Johnson, in a loud, authoritative voice. "I can't stand no more of it, and I ain't a-goin' to! You take that towel there and wash your eyes and fix your hair. And, Liz, you pack your sister some clothes! She's got seventeen minutes—if that clock's right—to catch the steamer, and she's goin' to catch it! She's goin' to get married on board today, or maybe in San Francisco or Los Angeles tomorrow or next day—you help her out there, Ma. Quick, now—while I phone for a taxi!"

"Len, are you crazy?" Ma began royally. But Pop, crazy or not, was at least unafraid. "You quit talking, Minnie," he said sharply, "and get up and stir yourself." Pop staid tenderly solicitously, to Maggie, guiding her to the sink, switching on the cold water, the furious glare in his eyes as he looked at the other women in curious contrast to the gentleness of his voice when he addressed her. "In this envelope is my half-month's pay, dearie," he said—"You keep your mouth closed, Elizabeth, till I give you leave to speak!" Pop interpolated fiercely—"and you can get yourself some clothes, first place you stop. Hurry up there, Ma—the taxi's liable to get here any minute."

"Len—it seems like I'm going to faint," said Mrs. Johnson, pausing pathetically in the act of rushing Maggie's black silk dress and her new clothes into a suitcase and adding Elizabeth's best nightgown and the Chinese wrapper she herself had won at a fair. "Well, you faint, then, but let me get Maggie off first!" Len said briskly and heartlessly. "Len, don't yell that way!" Ma said, weeping as she put on her black-velvet hat. "And we ain't going to miss you, Maggie, and we ain't going to slump," Len interrupted the frightened chorus to say loudly. "Now, you come on out—put your gloves on in the taxi—we ain't got but fourteen minutes!"

Laughing, crying, but always clinging tight to this newly found and amazing parent, Mary Margaret had only time to leave a hysterical goodbye with the dog, and the cat, and the beloved, despised, habby kitchen, with its cooling coffee and congealing sausages and limp dish towels and greasy sink. Then they were all four jammed into a taxi, and racketing through the Saturday morning streets, past the church, and the market, down the schoolhouse way—among the warehouses—

Their talk was incoherent—inconsequential—monosyllabic. "Can he make it?" "He says he doesn't know. Depends on the traffic on River Street. This ain't exactly an ideal wedding, dearie."

"Ah, don't, Pop. You'll make me cry!" "Driver, we goin' to make it?" "How much time have we?—Lean forward there, Pop, and see can you see the clock at Rubenstein's?" And then, down outside the big free-market, suddenly the agony of a halt.

An officer's imperative whistle and a blue-coated figure approaching. But Ma, even though speechless, was not entirely without resources. She dismounted from the taxi, met the policeman, and as an interested little crowd gathered, and before that officer could speak, fainted from sheer emotion, heavily, into his arms.

"She's all right—go on," Pop said in an undertone. Maggie sat back on the seat, holding Liz's hand, beginning to breathe again.

"Pop, can we make it?" "We could, dearie, if nothing else happens," Pop was beginning doubtfully, when another whistle, this time a soothing long breath, as of relief, interrupted him, and the driver, muttering something unintelligible that sounded like a prayer, turned in to a curb, stopped the car, and uttered aloud the single disgusted word, "Flat."

Elizabeth Johnson had sprang

pathetically. The girl did not stir. Her eyes fixed on the Allegría, her hands clasped. Somebody touched her arm, and she looked up and saw it was Joe's father. With him was Joe's mother; she had been crying, and his father's face looked grave, and his lashes were wet, too. But Maggie did not cry. She gulped, and her was little face twisted into a smile as she said simply: "I was going with him. I couldn't—I couldn't bear it. But it seems—he's gone."

"You were going with him!" his father said, sharply. "Here! Where are the launches, boy?—Mayne's launches—they're somewhere around here! This girl and boy aren't going to be any use apart, Lillian," he said to his wife, smiling, yet blinking tears from his eyes. "Let 'em both go off to Japan and console each other!" He was hurrying them along the dock, and Maggie found her hands filled with big green bills from Joe's father, and found herself kissing him, and liking the firm, fatherly embrace, and—much more amazing!—received a perfumed, powdery, half-crying kiss from Joe's magnifi-

from the machine, hailed another taxi, pushed her father and sister into it, and shouted feverishly: "To the Allegría. Dock Seventeen. Quick, now! I'll stay here and pay this man, Pop," she said, hurrying them on. "Good-bye, Maggie, darling, forgive me if I've been mean to you, and have a good time, and don't worry."

Then Maggie and her father were rushing on again; they had reached the piers at last, Pier Eleven, Pier Thirteen—still so far to go! And they could see the big clock saying that the hour had come and gone. It was three minutes past eleven.

Maggie turned deadly white, but she managed an agonized smile of reassurance for her father.

"That's all right, Pop. We did our best!"

"Maybe they didn't sail on the minute," said the new driver encouragingly. "I've seen 'em twenty minutes late!"

"Oh, go on, then—go on!" the girl said feverishly. "I can't go no faster than this, lady!" the driver said, hurt. "There ain't many of these cars can jump over- or under trucks, you know. You'd do better to take your little suitcase and run for it."

cent mother, too. She was helped into a dancing little launch, the dirty surface of the water was bubbling close beside her. They were cleaving a straight track toward the big liner, and Maggie, leaning over the bow of the launch, was straining toward it, was clapping her two hands over her head to attract its attention, to hold it one minute—one half-minute more!

The pilot's tug was alongside, ready to cast off from the sheer great side of the steamer; a rope

her—out there in the bay. As in a dream, Maggie stood still, on the rough, thick, splintery boards of the dock, and looked through the great arched opening, and saw the vessel, balanced like a beautiful great swan, not moving now, but far out on the blue water.

"The pilot's going to drop her any minute, now, miss. Ain't that a shame!" said the baggage boy, sym-

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And everyone who could find a place by the long rails, first cabin, tourist cabin, steerage alike, saw a launch racing out from the city, and a small girl standing bare-headed—in the launch, an aureole of gold blowing about her head, and her hands clasped high above it, like the hands of a small martyr at the stake.

And suddenly, in their own ranks on the steamer's decks, there was a corresponding commotion, and a tall, lean boy, with a desperate and anxious look upon his face, broke through them, ran down a companionway, and another companionway, to the break in the railing where the pilot's ladder hung, and shouted:

"Wait a minute, down there! I've got to go back! Don't take that ladder down—wait a minute!"

Then—so quickly that even during the whole long voyage, with the blissful young bride and groom affording a reminder before their very eyes, some of the passengers couldn't remember in exactly what order it all occurred—then the flying launch had reached the pilot's tug, and the boy had descended the rope ladder, and the girl had sprung from the launch to the tug, and there was a double scream of "Maggie!" and "Joe!" and the two young things were in each other's arms, and crying—not but what everyone else was crying, too.

They stood there on the rocking tug for whole minutes—minutes—minutes, and the world looked on,

and laughed, and wiped its eyes, and they neither knew nor cared. And it was only when the great Allegría actually blew her whistle and the little tug blew hers that Joe put his arm about Mary Margaret Johnson and said, dazedly and happily, without moving his hungry eyes from her exquisite and radiant face:

"Come on, darling, we've got a lot to do—we've got to start to Japan, and get married, and have lunch, and talk, and everything!"

And then they negotiated the rope-and-plank ladder and the passengers made an aisle across the deck for them.

"We're going to have a wedding, some time this afternoon," Joe said excitedly, and proudly and youthfully, to the lingering groups that simply couldn't disperse in the face of this fascinating drama and comedy in one. "And you're all invited!"

"Oh, thank you—thank you—thank you!" Maggie whispered.

And Joe showed her boats and ropes and writing rooms and dining rooms and a Japanese baby in the steerage, and his own big cabin—their cabin, with its bath.

"You'll hear the bugle for lunch, soon," he exulted, as the cool sweet ocean air began to blow over the ship, and she careened slightly, and the color was whipped into Maggie's face, and the gulls and the city dropped farther behind—and farther behind—and farther behind.

"You don't mind that rocking? You're a wonder! You're going to love it."

"I shouldn't wonder if it's the ideal life, Joe," said Mary Margaret.

THE END



There was a double scream of "Maggie!" and "Joe!" and the two young things were in each other's arms.

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The Washington Duke Hotel, in Durham, with its 300 rooms, 300 baths, two ball rooms, impressive dining room and busy Coffee Shoppe ought to be a good salesman for North Carolina and North Carolina products. But on the bill of fare of the Washington Duke the other day I found Smithfield ham and no North Carolina ham, although Smithfield never packed a better ham than the peanut-fed hams of Gates, Chowan, Perquimans, Jones, and Onslow counties.

I found Delaware shad on that bill of fare, when North Carolina shad, fresh from waters only a few hours remote from Durham, excel the Delaware article.

I found Long Island scallops on the same bill of fare, when finer scallops are in Bogue Sound, North Carolina, a few hours from Durham. I dare say the shad and scallops served at the Washington Duke were the North Carolina product, although the Smithfield ham may have been packed in Baltimore. But why not advertise our North Carolina products? Why give the tourist stopping overnight in North Carolina the impression that we have to send to the Delaware River for shad, to Long Island Sound for scallops, to Virginia for our hams, to Idaho for potatoes, and back to Long Island for ducks?—W. O. Saunders.

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No. 8

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