

The Special Delivery Girl

It was a damp and generally disagreeable Christmas morning. There was no promise of sunshine and the light was still further dimmed by a murky mist. Maggie Brown looked slowly up at the cloudy sky as she seated herself in the express wagon, and shook her head disapprovingly. Then she glanced at the contents of the load behind her, smiled and nodded to the coatless porter at the rear door of the great store, and told Tommy to drive along. Tommy yawned heavily as he spoke to the horse and the latter briskly drew the wagon through the narrow street into the broad thoroughfare. There were very few people stirring, it was not 7 o'clock, and the highway was quite free from other vehicles. The horse was fresh and needed little urging, and the load, despite its bulkiness, was not weighty. So they sped towards the eastern suburb of the city at a very fair rate of speed.

Maggie Brown was undertaking a new line of work. She had contracted to deliver a load of Christmas gifts that the great department store had been unable to handle the day and night before. It came about through the sickness of Mr. Pegler. Mr. Pegler was a neighbor of Maggie's, and he owned a horse and wagon and did a thriving expressing business in an independent way. Mr. Pegler was always in demand at Christmas time. He was a careful man and he knew the city thoroughly, and he always helped out when the great holiday rush came. When he fell sick, and it happened the very evening after he had disposed of the last package on his load before Christmas, and the doctor ordered him to stay in bed all the next day, Mr. Pegler felt very badly in mind as well as body. Not only would he lose the money for his work, but he would sorely disappoint the manager of the great store who had bargained for his services. He felt worse about this than he did about the loss of money, being a conscientious man. Maggie knew he was ill because she saw the doctor come, and she went over to inquire how he was and to cheer up Mrs. Pegler, who had a way of taking trouble quite too seriously. And when Maggie found out how badly Mr. Pegler felt about his failure to carry out his promise, she asked Mrs. Pegler if she couldn't see him, and Mrs. Pegler took her into the bedroom where Mr. Pegler lay propped up on a pillow, looking very pale and very much unshaven.

"Good evening, Mr. Pegler," said Maggie Brown, as she took the rocking chair by the bedside. "Glad you're feeling some better. I won't bother you but a minute. When I heard you couldn't get out tomorrow I was just thinking that you might let me take your horse and wagon and deliver a load for you."

The sick man's eyes grew very big. "You?" he murmured, as he looked over. Maggie was a well built girl of sixteen, comely and neat, and with a pair of wonderfully bright grey eyes. "You don't know the streets and you can't drive."

"I shall take Tommy along to do the driving and watch the load and I know your horse is gentle and safe, and perhaps the men at the store could give me a lot of things to deliver in houses close together, and besides, I should take a map."

The sick man's face lighted a little. "You're a smart girl," he murmured. "You almost make me believe you can do it. Can you trust Tommy?"

"Tommy will do what I tell him to do," said Maggie Brown with some emphasis. "And his pay will depend on the way in which he does it. Besides, he's wild to drive horses."

"I wish you could do it," the sick man said. "I haven't sent word yet to Mr. Mathews, an' he's countin' on me sure. If you could only manage it I wouldn't ask for a cent's pay for the horse an' wagon."

"I can manage it all right," said Maggie Brown confidently. "That is, if Mr. Mathews will trust me."

The sick man looked at her long and earnestly.

"I don't know anybody else I could get to do it," he said. "I'll write a bit of explanation to Mr. Mathews. Get me paper and a pencil."

So with much difficulty and some groaning the disabled Pegler wrote a note both of explanation and introduction. "Guess that'll do," he said as he passed it to Maggie, and the girl glanced it through.

"Mister Mathews," it read, "this girl will take mi place i am sick, she can do it she is smart an honest excuse me plesse Mister Pegler."

"That will do, I'm sure," said Maggie as she folded the precious document. "And now I'll get the key

of the barn from Mrs. Pegler and go home and tell Tommy and father."

"You're a good girl," said Mr. Pegler gratefully. "I wish you belonged to me."

"Guess father would object to that," said Maggie with a little laugh as she arose to go.

"Guess likely he would," said Mr. Pegler with the ghost of a smile. "Get the barn key from Mrs. P., an' send her in here. I need another dose."

Maggie talked her father over in short order. He was an easy man and was under the sway of his daughter's masterful ways. There was nobody quite like Maggie.

"But what am I to do for my Christmas dinner?" he plaintively asked.

"There's plenty of good things in the pantry," said Maggie, "and you can keep the fire in the kitchen stove a-going, and besides, Tommy and I'll be home for supper and we'll have a real jolly time tonight. It ain't as though you couldn't cook, you know, father. You cooked breakfast for Tommy and me for more than two years. You haven't forgotten that."

And she patted his cheek affectionately.

"It will be a queer Christmas day," grumbled Tommy. "A fellow won't have no time to look at his Christmas presents nor nothin'."

"They'll keep," laughed Maggie. "And suppose we save them all till evening and then enjoy them with father."

"I was goin' skatin'," said Tommy.

"Indeed," said Maggie.

"But I guess there won't be no ice."

And so the bright-eyed girl and her yawning brother drove up to the great store, where the alert Mathews listened to the explanation Maggie offered, and read the note, and shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't know about this," he said in his hurried way. "Somebody might steal the whole load away from you."

"Do you see that boy out there in the wagon?" said Maggie. "That's my brother Tommy and he's nearly fifteen. He can whip any two boys of his size on our street. He's a beautiful fighter. And besides," here his voice sank to a whisper, "he's got a gun this morning. It's a cheap gun, but Tommy knows how to use it, and I'd be sorry for any man who tried to bother us."

The alert Mathews laughed despite his manifold cares.

"I guess we'll have to trust you," he said. "We need your services too much to be overparticular. Of course we'll hold Pegler responsible for anything that goes wrong. Here, Jim, load up this wagon. I'll try to get things together so you'll have as little driving to do as possible. Sorry Pegler is sick. Tell him we'll credit him with \$4 if everything is satisfactory. Here, George, fill up this delivery book. Be sure you deliver at the right numbers, my girl, and get a signature for every delivery."

So Maggie and Tommy were on their way to the eastern suburb of the city, Tommy keeping an eye on the horse and Maggie closely studying the delivery book.

"Vassar street comes first, Tommy," said the girl. "No. 29 Fourth street beyond Rumford avenue."

"I know all the streets out there," said Tommy. "I helped a boy once who was distributin' bills."

So presently they reached Vassar street, and No. 29, and Maggie lightly jumped down. She quickly found the right package, and started up the front steps. "No. 53 is next," she called. "Drive on and find it."

The door of the house was hastily opened by a little man with sandy whiskers and the little man was angry. "This is a pretty time to get around," he cried. "I sat up half the night waiting for you."

"No. 29," said Maggie as she pushed forward the book. "Brimfield. Please sign."

"Why, bless my soul," cried the little man, "it's a girl! Well, well." And he actually smiled as he scribbled his name in the proper place.

"Thank you, sir," said Maggie. "Merry Christmas, sir."

"Wait," said the little man. "This is a special delivery, ain't it?"

"I guess it is," said Maggie.

The little man drew his hand from his pocket and a shining dollar came with it.

"There," he said, as he laid it on the delivery book. "Special deliveries are always extra, my dear — and a Merry Christmas to you," and he snatched up the package and quickly closed the door.

Maggie looked at the dollar and she looked at the door. Then she smiled and dropped the money in the purse

at her belt, and ran down the steps and up the street after Tommy.

At No. 53 a fussy lady suddenly appeared and sharply called. "Packages go to the side door."

"Yes, ma'am," said Maggie with a smile and trotted around the house. The fussy lady opened the side door herself.

"Dear me," she said, "the idea of sending a girl on such business! This isn't your regular occupation is it?"

"No, ma'am," replied Maggie.

"I'm a special delivery. Please sign there."

"Why are you doing it?" inquired the lady.

"Because the regular man is sick and couldn't work."

"Your father?"

"No, ma'am, just a friend."

The fussy lady looked hard at Maggie.

"Wait," she said, and ran back into an inner room. A moment later she was back with a cup of coffee and a delightful little cake in a pasteboard box.

"You're a good girl," said the fussy lady, "but I don't like to see them put such work on you."

And Maggie drank the coffee, which was very good and warming, and thanked the fussy lady and wished her a Merry Christmas, and hurried away with the cake to Tommy.

At the next house, which was No. 79, a pale little boy raced through the hall and opened the door for her. She had several packages for this home and this little boy looked up at her with a quick smile.

"Is you Santa Claus' little girl?" he asked.

Before Maggie could reply a white capped young woman appeared in the hallway.

"Come away from the open door, Robert," she cried. "Please step in," she added to Maggie. The little fellow caught Maggie's hand and drew her forward, and then the nurse closed the door and took the packages and signed the book.

"You must see my pretty tree," said the little boy still clinging to Maggie's hand.

"Oh, I'm in such a hurry," Maggie gently protested.

"But you must come," and the little boy tugged the harder.

"Please do as he says," murmured the nurse. "He has been very ill and we have to spoil him until he is quite well again."

So Maggie was led back into the library and showed the beautiful tree, and the little boy made her take a big and gorgeous cornucopia full of candy—the nurse nodding to her not to refuse it.

"I like you," said the little boy, "cause you's got eyes just like my mamma, who's gone 'way down soul' cause she's so sick. You'll come and play with me, won't you?"

Maggie looked at the nurse, who nodded again.

"Yes," she said, "I'll come very soon."

As she left the house the nurse softly said, "You mustn't forget your promise. He'll talk about it until you come. And Mr. Oliver will be so glad to pay you for your time if you can only amuse him and keep him from worrying."

"I will come next Friday afternoon," said Maggie after a moment's thought.

She found Tommy looking a little anxious.

"I was just going to drive into the yard and look for you, sis," he said. Then he smiled as she laid the big cornucopia beside the cake in its pasteboard box. "Well, I like this," he chuckled.

So from house to house the brother and sister went, and at every door Maggie found fresh evidence of the gentle Christmas spirit. Sometimes it took the form of a word of friendly greeting, sometimes it was expressed by a coin or rustling bill. Maggie protested against these practical evidences of good will but was always overruled, and presently she found it was a great waste of time to protest at all. At one place a kind-hearted hostess filled a pasteboard box with good things from her hospitable table, and this made a fine lunch for the boy and girl, even if it had to be eaten at hurried intervals.

It was just 2 o'clock when the last package was delivered, and Maggie telephoned the welcome intelligence to the anxious Mr. Mathews at the big store. Then they turned the horse in the homeward direction and let him take his own pace.

Mr. Pegler was asleep and resting easily. So Mrs. Pegler informed Maggie.

"Tell him when he wakes up that the load was delivered all right and that there's \$4 to his credit at the big store," said Maggie.

"Bless you," said Mrs. Pegler, "he says you're to have that."

"Not a penny of it," cried Maggie. "Tell him I got my pay all right, and ain't complaining a mite."

That evening, as they contentedly sat around the table in the living room, having enjoyed an excellent dinner that Maggie had prepared after giving herself an hour or two of rest, the girl turned to Master Tommy.

"What do I owe you, Tommy?" she asked.

He looked at her a little anxiously. "I really ought to have a dollar," he said.

Maggie laughed. "I think that's fair, don't you, father?" she said. "Here's your dollar, Tommy."

Tommy's eyes brightened as he

clutched the coin. But they gave with astonishment when Maggie eyed the contents of her purse on a table. "I find," she said, "a dollar later, that I have here \$5.25 to add to Tommy's account in the bank and that will leave me the same as he gets, \$6.25." She laughed lightly. "It seems to me," she said, "that there must be a good many worse kinds of business than this Christmas special delivery." — Rose in Cleveland Plain Dealer.

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