

# PORTRAIT OF MAGGIE

by Barney Sabath

WHEN MAGGIE LISTON's father died, leaving her all alone, in debt, and just out of high school, she tried to hide her fear and humiliation. "I'm going to do something about this!" she cried, her brown eyes flashing.

Putting aside her dream of going to State University, she took over her father's small, unsuccessful watch-repair shop. She refused dates because they didn't matter anyway, except for Clint, who did go away to State U. And at night, in her tiny apartment, she studied correspondence courses in bookkeeping and merchandising as well as watch repair.

With a business sense not inherited from her father, she managed to add a line of watch bands and a modest stock of watches. Not bad progress for three years. One day the shop would bring her a good living, if she kept as her guide the neat *No Credit* sign that hung on one wall.

Now, as the handsome, tousle-haired young man in the blue sports shirt smiled at her across the counter, she was not moved to give him the credit he asked.

"Sorry," she said. "Come back when you have the money for your watch."

She had worked hard to pay her father's debts, including more than \$3,000 in hospital and doctor bills paid at the time by his oldest and closest friend, Tim Andexter.

"Don't you trust me?" the young man asked. "Is it because I'm new in town? Or don't you think I have an honest face?"

"You have a nice face," she replied, "but I'm sure you understand the ways of business."

His face was nice—dark blue eyes much too large for a man, firm jaw, and a totally irresponsible smile that strangely resembled Clint's.

"Why not take it out in trade?" the young man was suggesting. "After all, I'm an artist."

"No, thanks!" she said crisply. "I don't need any murals today."

He shrugged, and gave her his lazy smile. "Well, how about coming up to my garret for a look at evidence of my neglected talent?"

She shook her head. It was hard to dislike him.

"No appreciation of art," she said. "I was afraid of that. You look like the practical type."

Maggie stiffened. "You bet I'm practical!" Her voice was bitter. "You with your carefree life, your art-for-art's-sake look. Why don't you get a job, face up to your responsibilities? And don't try to tell me you haven't any other creditors."

For a moment she could only stammer and stare at the strange picture. What did it mean? Surely it contained some hidden insult.

He grinned. "None so pretty as you, or with such a money-for-money's-sake look."

He turned and walked out. Maggie strode furiously into the back room and peered into the small mirror above the washstand.

"Money-for-money's-sake look indeed!" she muttered angrily.

A WEEK LATER he came back with a large flat parcel under his arm. He put the parcel on the showcase and unwrapped it.

Then he held up the picture for her to see. She gasped. It was a water-color of a girl with Maggie's face—only it was someone else. The girl's hair was in disarray and on her face was a warm, eloquent smile.

For a moment she could only stammer and stare at the strange picture. What did it mean? Surely it contained some hidden insult.

Speaking as calmly as she could, she said, "Please leave—now, and I mean right now!"

"I know," he said resignedly, running a hand through his mussed hair. "No credit."

"Right," she said. "No credit. Go, and take your picture."

"I want you to have it," he said firmly. Then he grinned.

Maggie paused. Something in the way he spoke touched her. She dug into the case and handed him his wristwatch.

"I want you to have this," she said.

He grinned. "None so pretty as you, or with such a money-for-money's-sake look."

He turned and walked out. Maggie strode furiously into the back room and peered into the small mirror above the washstand.

"Money-for-money's-sake look indeed!" she muttered angrily.

"I know," she said dryly.

Another customer entered and Maggie turned away from Will Trent.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him scribbling on the scrap of paper that had been attached to his watch. As he left she scooped up the paper and glanced at it. It was an address and the invitation, "Come see my pictures sometime soon."

Later in the day Maggie glanced at the portrait again. It angered her, yet it fascinated her. She took it into the back room, propped it on a crate.

For the next week the painting troubled her. It made her feel guilty, it made her feel empty. That was probably its purpose, she thought contemptuously. That girl with the unruly hair and enigmatic smile wasn't Maggie Liston. She couldn't understand why it bothered her.

One afternoon Uncle Tim Andexter stopped by. He was small and shrunken, but he had a twinkling humor and vitality that Maggie admired.

"How's business?" he asked.

"Fine, darling. How about having dinner with me?"

He nodded. "Why don't you close early today?" he suggested. "I'm hungry already."

"Can't," she said. "Business." "You are all work," he said with a sigh. "I'll take my newspaper and read in the back room."

A moment later Maggie heard him cry out in surprise.

"I just saw the painting, Maggie."

"Atrocious, isn't it?" she laughed.

He didn't answer, and just then a customer entered.

At dinner Maggie said to Uncle Tim, "What did you think of the picture?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Of course. That's why I'm asking."

The old man's eyes grew sober. "First I thought, here is a woman in love, painted by a man in love. Then I thought, it can't be Maggie." He paused. "It looks very much like your mother."

For a moment she was confused. Her mother had died long ago, and Maggie's memory of her was quite indistinct.

"What you say about my mother—was she terribly in love?"

"Terribly," said Uncle Tim.

"But how could she be? Father was so—careless of money. Look how he died—leaving nothing."

Uncle Tim was staring at her with a strange expression.

"Your father had a capacity for love," he said. "Scrubbing floors and making a meal out of leftovers didn't make your mother unhappy. They had



a really wonderful life together."

THAT NIGHT, for the first time in three years, Maggie wept. She wept with remorse—because she had just discovered the difference between making a living and making a life.

She remembered the picture. Uncle Tim had said, "It is a painting of a woman in love, by a man in love." Maggie wept because it was not a picture of her. She wept because she wanted to change herself but didn't know how to begin.

Next morning, when she unlocked the shop, she found an envelope that had been slipped through the mail slot during the night. She opened it and counted \$8.50. From the truculent Will Trent, of course. No one else owed her money.

At noon she hung a note, "Gone for the day," in the window, locked up, and left the shop.

She consulted a scrap of paper and walked several blocks to the address written on it. The landlady, a sharp-eyed old woman, said Mr. Trent was out. When Maggie identified herself as a friend and asked to be let into the apartment, the woman shrugged and said he kept his door open.

On entering, Maggie was startled by a room full of disorder. An old mahogany chest, two chairs, and an unmade brass bed claimed one side of the large room. The rest was a confusion of art materials. Pictures were propped haphazardly against two

walls. The floor was littered with used-up paint tubes and scraps of canvas. Here and there a preliminary water-color sketch was roughed out on a piece of newspaper.

She hesitated in the doorway, a warning voice inside reminding her that there was still time to be sensible. She could close the door behind her and go back to the shop—to the security she was building for herself.

She could forget Will Trent, just as she had forgotten Clint . . . except that she hadn't forgotten. That was why she was here. Determination rose inside her—she would not leave until she knew whether there was real hope for herself and Will Trent.

She picked her way across the room to the wide window that looked out on the town square. Gingerly she propped up his pictures on the easel, one at a time, and studied them. Some were landscapes, some portraits. In each she saw Will Trent, strong yet gentle. She began to understand why he lived in an attic and painted with such determination.

"Painted by a man in love," she murmured to herself.

Then she went downstairs and asked the landlady for a bucket of water, a scrub brush, and some rags. She hung the jacket of her crisp spring suit over a chair, rolled up the sleeves of her blouse, and began to bring order to the cluttered studio.

While she was on her knees scrubbing, she heard footsteps on the stairs.

The door opened and she found herself staring up at Will Trent. He was wearing a suit, a white shirt, and a conservative tie. He removed his hat, disclosing well-combed hair.

"Hello," he said, his smile showing more pleasure than surprise.

Maggie tried to speak but couldn't. Finally she managed a weak "Hello."

"I've got a job," said Will Trent.

"Thank you for the money," Maggie said, still weakly.

"I owed it."

Neither spoke for a moment. Then Maggie rose and stood beside the window, looking out at the darkening sky.

"Your job," she said huskily, "you've got to give it up." Silently she pleaded, "make me beautiful, like the girl in the portrait." And she knew she was thinking like a girl who wanted first of all a life, not a living.

Will Trent grinned. "We'll talk later," he said. "First I'm taking you to dinner. I have money this time. Go down to the washroom on the second floor and clean up. Here's a towel."

Maggie stumbled dizzily down the stairs. She closed the washroom door behind her and leaned wearily against the washstand for a moment. Then she stared into the mirror. Her hair was loose, perspiration glistened on her forehead, and her nose was smudged. But there was a smile that was new—a smile of discovery. It was the smile of a woman in love.

This time she recognized the face reflected in the mirror.



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