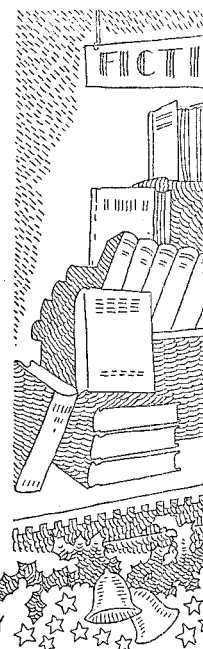


Jobs in the Sky

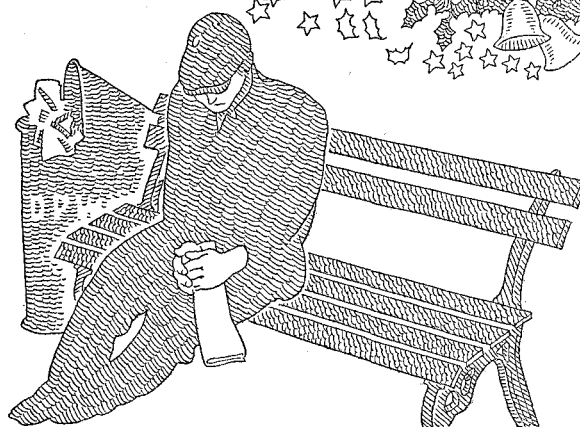
A STORY

By Tess Slesinger



It meant that you wanted to hold your job like nobody's business if you managed to get in ahead of Mr. Keasbey, whose name had been first in Mrs. Summers's section-book and the section-books of her predecessors for a noble fifteen years. Mr. Keasbey signed in daily at eight-forty (ten minutes before the deadline), and on the dot of eight-fifteen on pep-speech days (a good ten minutes before Mrs. Summers reluctantly counted you late)—and daily after removing the cover from his table of Important New Fiction and flicking his books with his private duster, stood with his fine white head bowed, waiting reproachfully like the best boy in the class. But on the day before Christmas, the Monday which was the last day of the Christmas rush, 1934, and the morning for which Mr. Marvell's Christmas speech had been announced (Mr. Marvell being the "M" in "M. & J."), Joey Andrews, No. 191-23, 167B, who had been till three weeks before without a number, in the army of the unemployed, wrote his name and number on the top line of Mrs. Summers's fresh page at exactly eight-eleven. Mrs. Summers asked Mr. Andrews if he had fallen out of bed; she said it was nice to see some face beside Mr. Keasbey's so early in the morning; and she said she had sat up in the bathroom all night (not to wake *Mister S.*) going over her records and trying to make them tally. . . . And Mrs. Summers, who limped before nine and immediately after five-thirty because there was not, she said, very much sitting on her job, limped off with the sales-books for the hat-girls who were also part of her section.

Once more as Joey Andrews looked down from the mezzanine onto the great sleeping main floor below, he felt in his stomach the dull ball of fear which a lover experiences when he recalls how nearly he missed going out on that particular Tuesday on which he met his love. But propping the biography of Dostoievsky against the memoirs of a Grand Duchess on his own table of History and Biography, Joey Andrews felt that



any recollection of his eight-months' nightmare among the unhired was unworthy of No. 191-23, 167B of a great department store. And wondering to what table *Jane Eyre* belonged (for surely it was not a biography?), "I must forget about the Washington Square gang," he scolded himself, "I don't belong with them any more"; and went to lay *Jane Eyre* tentatively on Miss Bodkin's table of Classics.

Downstairs the perfume girls were drifting in; the floor-walkers, adjusting their buttonholes and their smiles, moved here and there with dignity. Having arranged his own table, Joey Andrews looked about his beloved book department for some way to be helpful, some way to live up to the Christmas spirit of M. & J. He didn't quite dare to fix Miss Bodkin's table; and he was just pulling the long white nightgown off Mr. Keasbey's New Fiction when Mr. Keasbey himself walked in—it was the dot of eight-fifteen—and, forewarned by the section-book violated, bearing another's name before his own, gave Joey a haughty, suspicious look and began flying around his table making kissing sounds until his fingers came safely to rest on the handle of his very own duster.

Now the cosmetic girls were mounting stacks of cold



cream on their counters while near the doors the cheap stockings stretched coily over amputated limbs. On the mezzanine behind the book department the hat-girls in their drab black dresses and exquisitely sheer-hosed legs began clapping the hats on stalks like flowers. Mrs. Ryder, who kept the lending library at the back, came next; the hierarchy permitted Mrs. Ryder and Mr. Keasbey to bow with formal recognition of mutual virtue—Mrs. Ryder had been with M. & J. a noble twelve years to Mr. Keasbey's noble fifteen—before Mr. Keasbey hurried to return *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, which he borrowed every night that it had not been taken by a customer, for his mother who was eighty and had stopped sleeping. Mrs. Ryder began driving the hair-pins into the pretzel high on her head, and when Mr. Keasbey laid *Rebecca* on the table before her, pointed her mouth like a pencil and made a check-mark with her head: down—one, two; hold; up—one, two—and Mrs. Ryder and Mr. Keasbey part for the day.

Miss Paley of the Modern Library and movie-editions, to whom the hierarchy does not permit Mr. Keasbey to bow, mounts the mezzanine stairs with a look of resigned bewilderment on her melancholy face. Two decades of teaching school have left her permanently surprised at finding herself daily entering the commercial world (and how had she ever, in the teeth of Mr. Neely's, the Principal's, disapproval, made the change!)—and also there have been rumors breathed by Miss Bodkin that Miss Paley's life in the commercial world is to be very brief indeed, and it may be that some of these rumors have even reached Miss Paley. Yet here she is, daily from nine to five-thirty, not selling children's books, as surely, she complains to Joey Andrews who rushes forth to help her with her jungle of cheap editions, as surely she had, after two decades of teaching

little children, every reason to expect? Had she not, as Mr. Neely (who put things so well!) had put it, a gift for understanding children? But, Mr. Neely warned me, she whispers through her closed white mask, that the commercial world was something else again . . . and drawing out the handkerchief (given her by the best-speller's mother) from her place in the Modern Library copy of *The Old Wives' Tale* which she reads at idle moments in the day, Miss Paley dismisses Joey with a kindly, authoritative nod as though he were the first-grade pupil who had just collected the rulers. And Joey, rather glad to get away, for, ever since Miss Bodkin breathed the rumor, Miss Paley has been touched for him with some infectious germ, takes up his stand by his table of History and Biography.

Miss Willows, the buyer, trips over to her desk and lays her hat in the bottom drawer. But no Miss Bodkin. Miss Willows bites at her pearls as she makes a hasty survey of the book department, arranges Christmas calendars with her head on one side like a bird. Still no Miss Bodkin (Joey Andrews hates to think of no Miss Bodkin). "Heavens knows," murmurs Miss Paley to Mrs. Summers on the subject of varicose veins in which they both specialize, as Miss Bodkin's chum Miss Rees slips in on the stroke of eight-twenty the deadline, and carelessly pulls the cover off *The Young Girls Series* for which Miss Paley would cheerfully trade her whole leather-bound set of Proust; and "I know as well as Heaven," returns Mrs. Summers humorously, and she has forty minutes more of the luxury of limping. Beautiful Miss Fern Stacy who is so dumb (according to Miss Bodkin) that she can hardly make change, takes her place behind the stationery counter—Mr. Keasbey had fought bitterly against its ignoble presence in the book department, even for the Christmas rush week. Mr. Keasbey stands with his arms folded, his head lifted; a fit citizen in the world of M. & J., fit door-man to the gate of Heaven: perhaps one day Mr. Marvell will pause and glance at his noble mien, his professorial posture, and will think to himself, What a man! what a faithful employee. . . . And there suddenly is Miss Bodkin, having signed in fraudulently in the space left blank by her good friend Miss Rees, a Miss Bodkin defying a gullible world to imagine that she was not present at least as early as Mr. Keasbey, and that she does not every day of her life make off with a first edition hidden away under one of Mrs. Ryder's lending library covers. . . . Joey Andrews feels waves of purple climbing shamefully down his spine at the sight of Miss Bodkin's gooseberry breasts squeezed tight under her black satin dress; he remembers that it has been a long time since he has dared to ask a girl for a date, and that tonight is Christmas Eve.

Eight-thirty; and Mr. Keasbey, for the fifteenth annual successive time, leads his class as though he were

the monitor, down the mezzanine stairs for Mr. Marvell's Christmas speech.

"... and Mr. Marvell who needs no introduction has come all the way from White Plains at this early hour to give us one and all his Christmas message." Mr. Sawyer of the Personnel speaking ("O thank you, thank you for nothing," murmured Miss Bodkin, her small face expressing sarcastic devotion; Mr. Keasbey delivered a withering glance; and Joey Andrews, though sick with admiration for her gooseberry breasts, moved away from her contaminating influence, for Joey, having had a job for only three weeks was still more in love with the job than he was with Miss Bodkin).

Beyond where the shoe-clerks were gathered a white-haired man rose and bowed. "What a fine face," whispered Miss Paley; "he has Mr. Neely's eyebrows exactly." Faint applause, led by smart clapping of department heads, while the great man smiled dreamily.

"My friends ("Mister God in person," murmured Miss Bodkin mouthlessly; and Joey Andrews stared for comfort at the graveyard of boils on the back of Mr. Keasbey's neck): I only wish it were possible to know each and every, to shake each and every, to wish each and every but—the-femilay-of-M. & J.-is-too-large. (Laughter, the lingerie girls throwing themselves in fake passion against their shrouded counters; under cover of the polite sounds Miss Willows the buyer leaned across Joey Andrews and hissed *Miss Bodkin kindly stop that talking*. The white hairs in Mr. Keasbey's ears bristled sexagenarian triumph.) My friends, a spaycial responsibility toward your countray, your fellow-men, the femilay of M. & J. Have you ever stopped to think how the department stores contribute to the good cheer of this heppy holiday come rich and poor alike gifts for his loved ones differences forgotten all men are equal at Christmas and who has the honor the privilege the blessing ("Bring on the castor oil," groaned Miss Bodkin).

"Who but you, my friends? And this year in especial when so many renegades and complainers of course a bad year but take the good with the bad life wouldn't be moch fon if we didn't have our ups and downs like our good friends the ladies of the elevators here—and our slogan is down with the complainers, friends, we don't want 'em here why up at Princeton we used to wash out their mouths with soap maybe we ought to enlist the parfume gehls to do the same thing here. ("Haw haw" roared the shoe-clerks remembering public school but the book department merely smiled condescendingly, such humor was beneath them and they knew was meant to be.) Bear in mind my good friends a job for every good man or woman in this countray if you don't like this countray you can go to another if you don't like your job here you can leave it always plenty only glad step in shoes.

"One word in closing to the new friends taken on to help us in this merry busy season. We wish we could permanently retain each and every make a permanent member of the femilay of M. & J. each and every but let me say to each and every, *we* will do *our* baist if *you* will do *your* baist . . . and this is *your* big chance to prove yourselves invaluable to *us*, on this last day of the Christmas rush when *some* of our friends unfortunately *must be dropped*. (The book department glances briefly and guiltily at Miss Paley, who continues to stand with her hands clasped as though Mr. Marvell were the Principal leading assembly.) And I say this not merely to our new but it applies also to our old this is the day for *each* and *every*.

"In conclusion it is good-will that counts good cheer is the baist policy the spirit of Christmas all year round is our slogan we are one big femilay and we spread our good cheer our customers expect it demand it *pay* for it and now my friends I wish each and every a merry and profitable Christmas *keep on your toes all day our profit is your profit it may be that you can win yourself a permanent position* my friends I thank you each and every one."

Smatter of applause, Mr. Keasbey clapping on and on like an old Italian listening to the opera, while the section managers turned back toward their sections, but a thin man in a striped tie (Gadowsky who edited the monthly M. & J. *Banner*) leaped to a counter and cried: "Just one moment, friends. Let's give Mr. Marvell a hearty send-off to show our appreciation—altogether now, M. & J. 'Tis of Thee. . . ." The song straggled out across the floor; heads craned for a last glimpse of Mr. Marvell but Mr. Marvell was on his way back to White Plains; the song died.

O God, if the gang could see me now, thought Joey, taking his place for this day of days before his careful table of History and Biography. (Y'oughta forget that bunch, y'don't belong with them any more. And look around, look around, Jesus it's like heaven to be working.) Now there steals over the book department, the hat department, the entire floor below, a period of hurried hush, of calm excitement; a poised expectancy, denoting the birth of the store for this great day. Now the aisles lie flat and virgin, waiting, breathless and coy, for merry and profitable defilement. (Remember Pete . . . passed his examinations for the bar . . . in between starving he handed out grocers' handbills . . . and Dopey Simpson, turned down a job for \$11 . . . said he wouldn't stay straight under \$25 per.) Now you can hear Miss Bodkin whispering with Miss Rees about the rumored romances of Miss Fern Stacy the stationery girl: "When she said *three* I knew she was lying, there aren't three men in the city fool enough to propose to a girl a depression year like this." (Remember Rounds

... been a scholarship boy at a swell prep-school until the depression cut down the scholarship fund ... went around saying over Latin verbs to himself. ... Dad said I'd meet swell fellows in New York, but he didn't think I'd find 'em on a park bench.) Now the large clock over the entrance doors jumps to eight fifty-three; Miss Paley stands sweet and serious like a school-teacher—and God, it's as safe as being in school again, thinks Joey, coming here every day, nice and warm, watching the clock jump like that on its way to nine. ... Mrs. Summers, her eyebrows dancing like harassed ghosts, limps like a nervous shepherd among her flock; only seven minutes more of that limping, Mrs. Summers! M. & J. expects courtesy health good cheer of its employees, the customers expect it demand it PAY for it. ...

Now Miss Paley closes *The Old Wives' Tale* with the best-speller's handkerchief in her place, and stands lifting her melancholy mask like a lamp waiting to be lighted. Behind her you can see tucked over a row of books her pocketbook, another of her many crumpled handkerchiefs, a pocket-comb; for Miss Paley has moved in (despite the rumors), Miss Paley has settled in (she has not heard the rumors), among the cheap books as she had for two decades in her classroom, this is *your* day, Miss Paley, to prove yourself invaluable, and *yours* too, Joey Andrews, and *yours* and *yours* and *yours*, each and every ... (Remember Jonesy, a real bum, Jonesy ... turned Christian and left the gang, went and hung about with the Christers on the Y breadlines ... pan-handling and spending his pennies on Sterno which he converted into alcohol by filtering through his handkerchief at the horse-trough at the end of the Bowery ... in his Sterno he thought or pretended he thought he was Jesus. But Rounds who had been a scholarship boy said he'd go Red before he'd stand on a breadline or sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" like Jonesy.) Now you can hear Miss Bodkin: "I hate this Goddamn place, they fix the quotas high so nobody can possibly make a commission except the week before Christmas." Foolish Miss Bodkin! a daughter of the familay of M. & J. doesn't she know when she's well off? Take care, Miss Bodkin, this is *your* day too. (Remember fumbling in the ash-can for a paper before turning in—those nights you hadn't the wherewithal for a flop—turning in on the grassy center of Washington Square, surrounded by those beautiful houses ... dreaming and planning with Rounds the One Perfect Hold-up—can Mrs. Summers read the mind? ... remembering, because you couldn't sleep, how long it had been since you had had a girl ... remembering, because you couldn't sleep for the drunks singing at the other end of the dormitory, *If you've said your prayers Joey my son no harm can come to you.*) Now Mr. Keasbey stands at the top of the mezzanine

stairs with a dignity like the dignity of a painless dentist, his arms folded, threatening and somber, as he turns and prepares for his victims. Miss Willows herself descends from her desk and takes a position in the middle of the floor sucking her beads, a débutante hostess waiting, leaning forward from the hips, to greet the crowds that must be stamping outside in the Christmas cold. Now the outside entrance doors are thrown open and you can see the waiting customers pour into the vestibule, sliding and coming to a stop like beads in a box. Now the big clock jumps to eight fifty-eight; Mrs. Summers can limp for two minutes more, and she limps from clerk to clerk, her eyebrows dancing, begging everybody to remember the Christmas spirit, and that extra pencils will be under each cash register.

(*You can get anywhere in this country with an education my son* said his father ... oh, gee pop, you were right, if you could only see me now! *I want you to have a high-school diploma son.*) Now the aisles below lie flat and smooth like roads, and the customers stamping in the lobby are a frenzied herd of cattle. "Watch the customers sharply," said Miss Willows; "and remember there are plenty of store detectives in disguise all over the store watching every move you make." Remember there are plenty of detectives, remember this is *your* day, remember the Christmas spirit ... remember they stood on a corner of Fourteenth Street where a young man promised them a bad winter and Rounds said "I'd sooner go Red than stand on a breadline," and Joey Andrews shook in his thin-soled shoes for he knew he'd starve sooner than stand on a breadline and he felt he'd stand on a breadline sooner than go Red ... remember *keep on your toes all day there will be detectives watching every move you make this is your big day to prove* ... remember Washington Square Park. ...

Where a bench was turned permanently outward, making a cosy little entrance to the grass hotel, a gateway to the open-air sleeping quarters for which no rent was charged, to which one came democratically without luggage, without even a full stomach. Remember you stood at the gateway, fumbling in a refuse barrel with your head well in, selected a *Times*—the tabloids are better reading but too narrow for practical use—for your blanket, mattress, pillow, bed-lamp, water-carafe and chamber-pot. On the grass you chose a spot among the reclining forms and lit your good-night butt. "Lousy flop-house joints," your neighbor murmured; "a plate of soup, a free wash—who in hell wants a wash?" Bug-Eye the one-legger from the World War had to show off by springing over the fence instead of coming in nicely through the revolving doors. "They say he can still feel that leg ... do you believe that?" "Shut up and give me a Chesterfield—oh, well, a Lucky will do." "Amo, amare ... amas, amat," murmured Rounds regretfully, as he picked himself up to go again to the

lavatory; he was having serious trouble with his stomach, no green vegetables . . . "there'll be pie in the sky by and by," sang Dopey Simpson. "Shut up, there, lights out, no more talking."

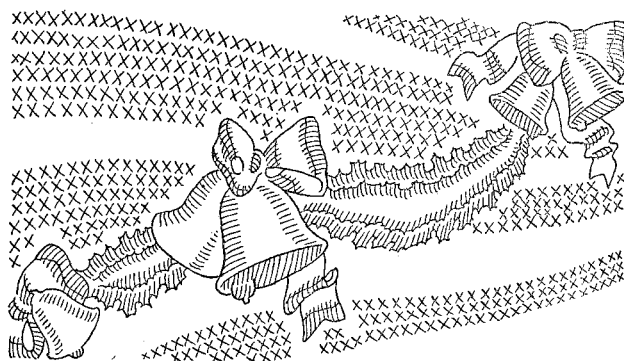
Stars in the sky overhead, pie in the sky, moon in the sky, dreams, girls, pie, jobs in the sky too.

"Move over." It is Jonesy the Christer, lit on Sterno. "If you believe, believe, believe on the Lord . . ." "Smart Aleck, dirty sucker, hanging around the Y . . . mamma's boy . . ." *Papa can anybody in the country be the president?*

Three drunks sitting on the bench too happy to go to bed (sitting in the lobby of their swell hotel, drinking, guzzling, gossiping.) "Yesh shir, the mosht terrible thing in thish country is the bootlegger liquor . . . all the lovely young college boys going to their raksh and ruinsh . . ." "If you believe, believe, believe. . . ." *Yes, my son and remember Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin and Our Lord was born in a Manger.* "In the war we had such nice warm mud . . ." "Shut up, Bug-Eye, what'd it get you?" "In the war we had such nice warm blood . . ." "If I wash preshident of the United Statesh, firshst thing I'd do I'd forbid the lovely young college boys. . . ." *Just close your eyes Joey if you've said your prayers nothing can happen to you.* "Such nice warm mud . . ." "Sometimes I think Bug-Eye's just plain nuts." "I lost my leg in Avalon . . ." "Onward Chris-tian so-o-oldiers" "When we ask them for something to e-a-t." Rounds came back from the lavatory: "I can't remember a deponent verb, I hate to forget all that." "If you believe, believe, believe. . . ." *Do I have to eat spinach mamma? Yes, Joey think of the little Belgian boys who haven't any—and it will make you big and strong.* "Work and pray, live on hay, there'll be jobs in the sky by and by." Rounds said all the comfort stations in the world wouldn't bring him comfort any more . . . he needed steamed vegetables . . . he said he'd go Red before he'd stand on a breadline. "Work and pray, live on hay, there'll be jobs in the sky. . . ." "Onward Chrissstian Soldiers. . . ." One of the drunks on the bench was putting into action an experiment he had heard of: thoughtfully tapping one knee with the side of his hand to see if he was still alive. He was not. He toppled over into his cold bed beneath the stars and if those gay boys sitting up and singing in their open-air dormitory thought they weren't spending that night with a corpse they were making just one hell of a mistake. . . . Remember how that morning, remember how all that day, remember . . . *remember this is your day, Joey Andrews. . . .*

The bell rings, it is nine o'clock. Miss Willows wets her lips against the first polite speech of the day. Mr. Keasbey goes rigid with desire. Mrs. Summers stands erect at last on her varicose legs.

The heavy doors swing open. The mob in the vesti-



bule surges and squirms; animals stampeding in panic inside a burning barn; then breaks suddenly, spilling like thick syrup down the aisles.

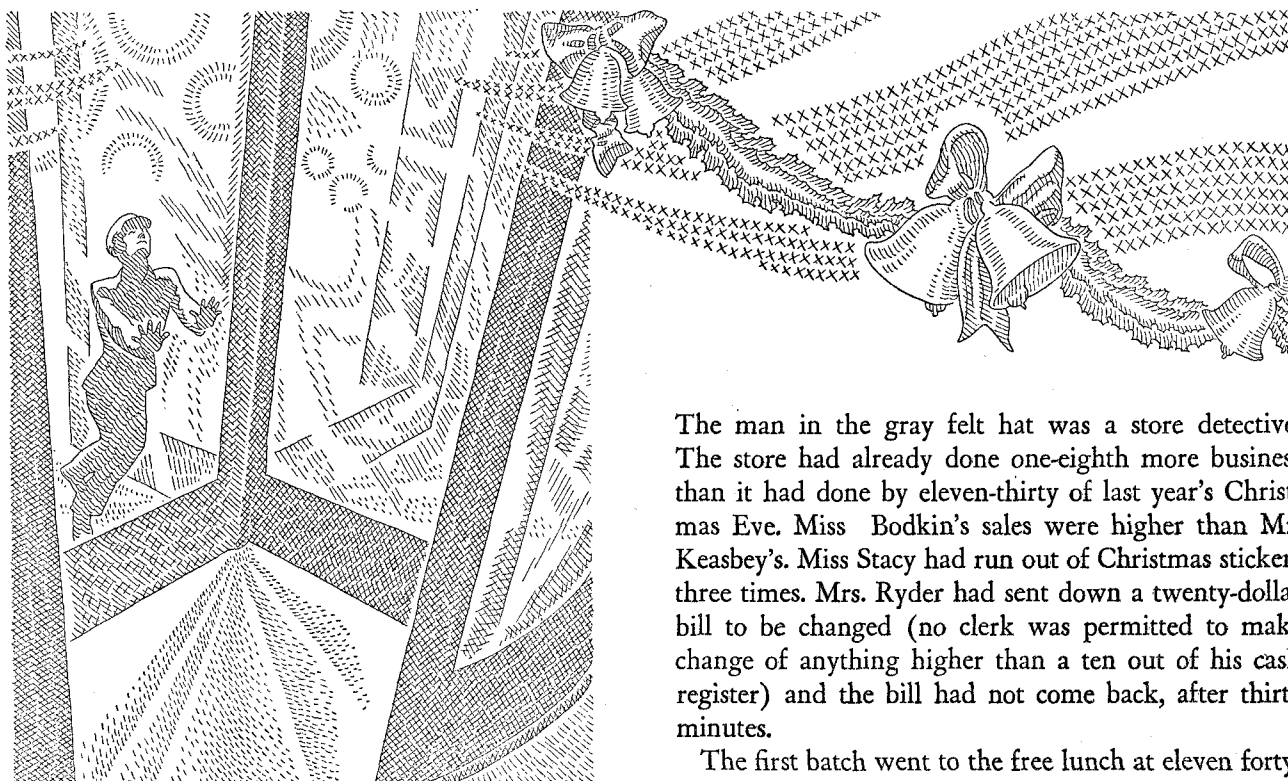
The machinery starts with a roar: unorganized come into conflict with organized; the clerks are overpowered, the floor-walkers swept into the stream of customers; the aisles are drowned; arms reach like fishing-rods into the piled bargains on every counter. But gradually the frantic haphazard customers are subdued and controlled by the competent motions of well-trained officers, who reason, who separate, who mollify and implore. Still mad, but under direction at last, the crowd settles around counters screaming to be fed.

The mezzanine grows tense with desire for invasion.

The first customer toys with one foot on the stairs; pinches her pocketbook and climbs laboriously upward. Miss Bodkin's short, smart legs run to capture; but over Miss Bodkin's black banded head Mr. Keasbey has already made a dignified assignation; like one hypnotized the customer makes her way surely and pointedly toward those grave commanding eyes. Miss Bodkin turns back in anger; meets Joey Andrews' admiring eye, and irresponsibly sticks out her tongue. Joey Andrews feels his confidence in No. 191-23, 167B slip a little as he sees with a pang Miss Bodkin guessing he is absolutely no good with girls.

"Mrs. Summerssss sssign please!" Miss Bodkin bags the day's next sale.

Surely these determined ladies and gentlemen (or are all the gentlemen detectives?) are not the same race as those tentative unhurried customers who loitered and weighed two weeks ago. Now they hurried fiercely, became mad people at indecision, rapidly bought two if they could not decide upon one. After favoring her customer with a cheap *Lorna Doone* off her Classics table, Miss Bodkin with malice and caution sells her the latest detective story right off Mr. Keasbey's beautifully stacked table, right under Mr. Keasbey's bristling but dignified nose. Mr. Keasbey bending his stately professorial back takes out his feather-duster and gives his books where Miss Bodkin has ravaged them a quick indignant flick. Miss Bodkin retires with the slyness of a nun to her own table.



A lady grazing close to Joey Andrews is captured by Mr. Keasbey two strides ahead of Miss Bodkin who retires viciously blowing her bang off her eyes, and in passing murmurs, "If I printed what I thought about the sixty-year-old teacher's pet, it would make a book too awful even for my own Classics table." But all the lady wanted and she said so too frankly was a ninety-five-cent copy of *Robinson Crusoe* for the kids and when Mr. Keasbey lost out trying to explain the value of the three-fifty illustrated issue on his own table, he turned her over in haste to Miss Paley; because Christmas is here, and Miss Paley's cheap editions are petty game at this season to an old hunter like Mr. Keasbey. . . . But Miss Paley receives the gift gratefully and looking at Mr. Keasbey's dignified face, who knows but she forgets for a minute Mr. Neely. Now Joey Andrews has his day's first customer, and he will never forget her kind eyes and brown fur coat as she stands eagerly waiting for him to wrap her package with the Christmas twine. Miss Paley, on her varicose knees hunting and hunting for *Robinson Crusoe* which is hard to find because it is exactly the color and size of the *Romance of Leonardo da Vinci*, lifts a face modestly benign with the joy of laboring to catch her breath, for Miss Paley knows from her last decade's experience that if she rose too quickly she was apt to get the least little bit of swimming in the head.

The invisible electric wire carried rumors from clerk to clerk. Free lunch would be served in the basement; twenty minutes to eat. A hat-girl had been arrested for stealing change. A shoplifter was caught downstairs.

The man in the gray felt hat was a store detective. The store had already done one-eighth more business than it had done by eleven-thirty of last year's Christmas Eve. Miss Bodkin's sales were higher than Mr. Keasbey's. Miss Stacy had run out of Christmas stickers three times. Mrs. Ryder had sent down a twenty-dollar bill to be changed (no clerk was permitted to make change of anything higher than a ten out of his cash register) and the bill had not come back, after thirty minutes.

The first batch went to the free lunch at eleven forty-five. They came back. They talked. They conquered. There was no second batch, except Miss Paley who went for a cup of tea. Miss Bodkin said the lunch was made of pieces of wrapping paper from returned purchases of 1929.

Mrs. Summers asked Joey Andrews if he thought he could make out without any lunch. Joey Andrews said sure and dashed off to his next customer.

Joey Andrews was drunk. If for a moment he found himself without a customer he ran up to one lady after another like a lost child seeking its mother.

Miss Willows forgot that for the last two years she had been buyer for the book department; the fire of selling caught in her veins again; she sold passionately. Let Miss Bodkin take the credit down in her salesbook, let Mr. Keasbey receive the commission—but let Miss Willows sell again! Her pearls caught on the edge of a table; scattered underfoot—Miss Willows laughed; turned to a customer and kicked the pearls recklessly out of her way. Miss Willows too was drunk.

Miss Bodkin whispered that her sales had reached \$150.

Miss Willows greeting customers at the top of the stairs had lost her debutante coolness and become a barker for a three-ring circus.

Mr. Keasbey broke down a reserve of years and squeezed Joey's arm as he pushed him out of his way.

Miss Paley, weak from no lunch, brushed her hand across her eyes and smiled until her whole head ached.

So it went on, and Mrs. Summers passed among them, conspicuous for her white head, for her customer-like lined face, and in the back of her distracted eyes lurked worry like guilt.

Who shall say that even Mr. Keasbey was actively, consciously motivated by the few cents' commission he was piling up? Each one was simply part of a great selling team, schooled and trained to perfection, each part functioned perfectly. All the time the crowd was changing, but imperceptibly; the stream which fed it must be flowing as fast as the stream which ebbed away. Now one was handing fifty-seven cents change to a gentleman with a green tie, now one was looking through the crowd for the lady with the feather.

In all his life Joey Andrews had never been so happy. His day was measured by customers, not by sales. He was mad with the delight of being necessary to so many people at once, with being efficient for his great team, with knowing exactly what part he had to play.

Miss Willows's voice grew hoarse, strangely naked she looked without her beads too—this way for calendars, this way for the latest fiction—Miss Willows was selling herself and was lost in passion.

But worry was growing out of Mrs. Summers's eyes. She hovered for a brief second about Miss Paley as she swung open the drawer of her cash register. The invisible wires hummed again: Has Miss Paley, maybe Miss Paley, it looks as if Miss Paley. . . . But Miss Paley, blind and dazed and cheerful, still flies among her cheap editions, still makes her way mildly in the commercial world.

Still the crowd filled the aisles, covered the floor. Only now the incoming stream was heavier than the outgoing, complemented by clerks and secretaries from Brooklyn to the Bronx. There was no slack, no shading. Even as there was no telling how the crowd melted and swelled again, there was no telling whether one's feet hurt or did not hurt; not only did no one attend to bodily functions, it was as if they had ceased to exist.

To get to your cash register now meant a hand-to-hand battle. The little bells rang as clerks shot out their drawers, counted rapidly, slammed them shut again. Joey Andrews clicked his open; good God, the bills under the weight were rising mountainously. He wasted a second of M. & J.'s time: he felt with his fingers the soft resistant pad of bills.

Mrs. Summers, with her kind and tortured smile, her worried eyes, her dancing brows, hovered briefly about Joey Andrews's cash register. Mr. Andrews . . . Mr. Andrews. . . . Joey Andrews gave her a bright child's look with eyes which looked swiftly away, beyond her, in liaison with his next customer.

Feet were like rubber tires now. Bodies were conveyors of books. Minds were adding machines. Fleeting glimpses of strained and happy faces—it might be Christmas, it might be the warm contact of body with body, of air made of the mingling of human breaths, it might be the happy exchange of one human tribe

with another, the excitement, the warmth, the continuous roar of sound. . . .

There was a slight lull, as there may be a lull in a storm. Joey Andrews, running like a mountain goat, caught Miss Bodkin's round black eyes, caught Mrs. Summers's level worried look . . . and then he found the eye of a lady with a scar on her throat, who was holding out a book to him, begging, begging, for the kindness of his service. . . . And then there was a flurry of ladies with anxious faces and Boy Scout nephews in the sticks; Miss Rees had a sudden success with her *Green Mountain Boys* and Joey Andrews deserted History and Biography to take on her overflow. And the human storm was loose again, wrapping them all together in an efficient human mass. . . . Mrs. Summers stands like a bird of ill omen hovering over Miss Paley's cash register.

The invisible electric wires are humming again. Six hat-girls are going to be dropped, three of them old employees, three of them just taken on for the Christmas rush. They don't tell them, says Miss Bodkin viciously, until the last minute—so they'll keep on selling to the end. Miss Bodkin knows everything before any one else. Paley's going to get hers, too, I know it, says Miss Bodkin—and Joey Andrews wonders what Miss Bodkin is doing tonight, on Christmas Eve, he wonders if he might have the nerve. . . .

Five twenty-five. Joey Andrews flew to his cash register, back to the customer with scar on her throat, back to his beloved cash register. "Well," says Miss Paley to Mrs. Summers, "it can't be helped and it can't be helped." It has happened. Miss Paley's got the sack. They've told Miss Paley they're letting her go. This is Miss Paley's last day. What do you think, Paley's just been fired. Jesus, poor old Paley. . . . Joey Andrews has a customer who wants something in green to match her library curtains. "Heavens knows," Miss Paley said, "I cannot understand, cannot comprehend . . ." and everybody knows that Miss Paley is using big words to keep from crying and to show that she was a teacher for twenty years. Joey Andrews's customer would prefer something a shade darker; maybe that Oscar Wilde. Mrs. Summers with her eyebrows going like an orchestra leader's baton: "I just feel terrible about this, Miss Paley, just terrible, I knew it last night and I couldn't sleep, they don't let us tell you till the last minute." Joey Andrews's customer doesn't see why they don't put out a Shakespeare in green suede—or even a dictionary.

Some one wants to buy Miss Paley's copy of *The Old Wives' Tale*. Such a nice lady, Miss Paley would like to tell her how much she loves that book. "Next to my Jane Austen," she says, holding her side as she graciously hands over the book. "The commercial world," says Miss Paley, reaching over for the wrapping paper. "My principal told me," Miss Paley said. "A natural

teacher. Born not made. He told me in so many words. . . ."

The clock jumps to five twenty-seven. Three minutes more in the commercial world, Miss Paley. Three minutes more of non-limping, Mrs. Summers. Three minutes more of being a human being, Miss Willows!

Mr. Keasbey is smiling like a boy. Christmas Eve—he hasn't missed one in sixty years with his mother; bought her a shawl, he did, on the third floor, got the employees' discount; had it for her in his locker. Good cook the old lady, probably spent the whole day getting up his Christmas dinner. "My principal told me," Miss Paley said; "he is a man who never minces words. 'Myra Paley,' he told me. . . ." Joey Andrews flies back to his cash register, he does not like to look at Miss Paley any more, Mrs. Summers is standing tentatively: "Mr. Andrews, oh, Mr. Andrews." Joey Andrews eyes her with his bright-eyed look, punching at the buttons which make the drawer slide out and tap him gently in the stomach: "Mr. Andrews, I see you are too busy now." "My job at the school," Miss Paley says, "is gone; it's gone, my principal told me." Mrs. Summers is off again, non-limping her last two minutes, like an unwilling bird of ill-omen off with her little messages—the hat-girls now.

And at last the closing bell rang and customers clung where they had been indifferent before and sales-clerks turned cold who had been themselves leeches ten seconds earlier, and customers would not, could not, tear themselves away until *Stars Fell on Alabama* was sent to Arkansas and the *Motion Picture Girls* to Far Rock-away and until they had made ab-so-lutely sure that the price was erased from the Grosset and Dunlap edition of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*—and Joey Andrews, making out a final sales-check, catches Miss Bodkin's eye on him at last, kindly at last, friendly at last, as if at last she were perceiving him, and Joey Andrews's heart leaps with the thought of Christmas Eve and the chance, the bare chance, that Miss Bodkin, with her gay little bobbing breasts. . . .

"My principal told me," says Miss Paley, not sitting as she had last night, on a counter and girlishly swinging her varicose legs as she added up her sales—but standing off a little, apart from them, as the great store empties, as the people whom the employees of M. & J. have served all day go home and leave the store to the clerks, to whom it properly belongs, Miss Paley stands all by herself, while Mrs. Summers, avoiding her now, for Miss Paley is dead, moves like a plague from hat-girl to hat-girl, infecting them, six of them, with the poison from headquarters that has killed Miss Paley. Miss Bodkin, although she has higher sales than any one else with the possible exception of Mr. Keasbey (who bends his hand over his salesbook as though he fears some one might copy his sums), subduces her joy in

her sales as a man uncovers his head for a passing funeral—and there is no doubt about it now at all, Miss Bodkin is definitely smiling at Joey Andrews as if she liked him.

They handed Miss Paley her handkerchiefs and pencils in silence. For all they were kind to her, and patted her shoulders, they were really hurrying her a little too, hurrying her out of their lives—Miss Paley was bad luck. "Maybe your next job will be a sitting-down one, honey," said Mrs. Summers, limping at last. They all wished Miss Paley would hurry. It is not nice to see some one dead. "Good-bye, all," Miss Paley said, and with a last bewildered look set her feet on the stairs to make her exit from the commercial world. And they watched Miss Paley float out with her handkerchiefs, her pencils, and her varicose legs, and all of them knew they would never see her again—and Joey Andrews, turning back with relief to his salesbook, gathered courage to return Miss Bodkin's smile.

Mrs. Summers is bearing down upon Joey, smiling too, suddenly every one is smiling at Joey, Joey Andrews is a good boy and every one is smiling very kindly at him and Joey happily smiles back. "Different with you, you are young," Mrs. Summers is saying. Young, yes, Joey Andrews is young as hell, and Miss Bodkin evidently thinks she has smiled at him too boldly, for now she lowers her eyes to her salesbook again. "You are young and life holds many opportunities," Mrs. Summers says, smiling and smiling. "They don't let us tell them till the last minute, I tried to tell you but you were so busy, you were so happy, but it's different with you, you're so young," says Mrs. Summers, smiling pleadingly for forgiveness. Of course I am young, thinks Joey Andrews, impatient with the old, with the white-haired Mrs. Summers—and he tries to catch Miss Bodkin's eye again and signal her, we're both young, tonight's Christmas Eve—but the old will never have done talking to the young, and Mrs. Summers goes on: "and so if you will leave your things tonight on my desk, and come for your pay-check next Thursday. . . ." Nobody is smiling at Joey Andrews now, everybody is looking down very conscientiously at his own salesbook, he feels without knowing quite why that they are anxious to have him go, he hurries through counting the sales he scored for M. & J., he stands apart a little as Miss Paley had, and when Miss Bodkin, not smiling any more now, comes and asks him in a low voice if he would like to come to her party tonight, just a few friends, just Miss Rees and herself and a few of the fellows, Joey Andrews says stiffly, "Thanks very much, I have a date," for Joey Andrews knows now why Miss Bodkin took to smiling at him so suddenly, Miss Bodkin knows everything ahead of every one else—and Joey Andrews is not going to hang around people and be bad luck.

Age Has Its Joys

Anonymous

Stimulated by the question "Is Any Old Person Happy?" a woman considers her life and answers in an emphatic affirmative

Nor long ago I was in the dentist's office when a woman of my acquaintance was in the chair. The dentist handed her the glass so she might see his work.

"God," she exclaimed, thrusting the mirror from her after one glance, "how I hate growing old!"

The remark was wholly in character and did not surprise me greatly. I confess, however, to a distinct shock when a few days later I read these words, written by one of the most distinguished women this country has produced, prefatory to a bitter statement that she too hated growing old: "Is any old person really happy? I wonder. Of course they say they are, but if they ever remember what they were like once, they must shudder inwardly. Only youth and life at full tide are beautiful. . . ."

Coming from a woman who has led a fine life and contributed notably to human progress, I am moved to examine this testimony somewhat carefully. Is it true, as she and so many others assume, that growing old is of necessity the lowest and most miserable state of man?

I am, I judge, from the standpoint of age, if no other, qualified to discuss this subject. Hardly a week passes that I do not notice a headline: *Aged Man Struck by Train* or *Aged Woman Hit by Bus*, only to read further and discover that these unfortunates were in their fifties. I myself am well past sixty. Certainly I have many previous states in my own existence with which to compare the present one, while a wide range of other case histories, in the modern jargon, lies open to my observation.

I am not proposing to discuss happiness as any continuous unalloyed state of being. But it is amazing how many adult, more or less thoughtful persons still cling to a notion that such a state is humanly attainable. It is, of course, this story-book notion, this iridescent hope, surviving from the fairy-land of childhood, which fogs so many marriages, especially in their beginnings. Happiness, then, I think of as a matter of fleeting moments, of hours, at most of days, and in the present instance as the relative amount of satisfaction, all things considered,



one derives from the later, as against the earlier, years of one's life.

Without forgetting the extraordinary woman to whom I have referred, Anne Sullivan Macy, the assumption that growing old is a terrible business is voiced chiefly, not by those who themselves are growing old, but by the young. No one, I imagine, will be disposed to dispute this. I myself was not immune from a similar point of view.

On what is this almost universal youthful assumption based? Very obviously, and first of all, on the inevitable decline in physical vigor in older persons. Quite simply, we can no longer do, or do with any degree of grace, those things from which the young themselves are at present deriving their greatest delight. Leaving out of account exceptional cases we cannot swim, skate, ski, play tennis or golf, dance or even ride in a way that commands admiration and respect from our younger. Granted. What I seriously doubt is that, except in the rarest cases, one who has lost the power through advancing age to excel in sports or purely physical accomplishments, suffers appreciably, if at all, from this fact. In my own case, dancing alone presents a temptation. I still respond uneasily to the strains even of a tango. But the pangs I must suffer on this account are, after all, easily bearable. When alone on the beach, as sometimes happens, I watch my grandchildren disporting themselves in the surf, I am confident I know a content quite equal to theirs. The sunshine, the distant sail, the