

Harper Perennial Modern Classics

Tropic of Capricorn



Henry Miller

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INTRODUCTION

by Robert Nye

Henry Miller's first book, *Tropic of Cancer*, was published in Paris in 1934 and was immediately banned in all English-speaking countries. With its sequel, *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), which actually covers an earlier period in Miller's life, it makes up a running fictional autobiography remarkable for its candour, gusto, and completeness. The two books have in common a plain-spoken truthfulness, a good-hearted comedy, and a quality of joy discovered somewhere on the far side of despair, things that their author was seldom to match and never to surpass in later self-unravellings.

When the 'Tropics' were at last made generally available in Britain and America in the Sixties, they were praised as works of sexual liberation. Since then they have sometimes been attacked as works of sexual misogyny. All this seems to me rather to miss the point, as does criticism of the two books for their verbal extravagance and their lack of art. Probably it is no accident that nobody was ever indifferent concerning Henry Miller. There are those who love him and there are those who hate him. His work does not allow of the mild alternatives of liking or disliking. A case could be made that this itself constitutes a fault, but I prefer to find a virtue in such passion, and an important one. The Miller that emerges from the books is, to my mind, an honest and lovable person, splendidly undefeated by experience, a man with an unquenchable appetite for the fundamental realities, and an infinite capacity for being surprised by his own innocence. If there is any message extractable from his work it is that of someone who – against all the odds and in spite of most of the evidence – says 'More' to life. This I find honourable.

Even in the 'Tropics' Miller is, of course, an extraordinarily diffuse and uneven writer. He repeats, paraphrases, and parodies himself with an abandon that in a lesser spirit would be suicidal. He is sometimes brutal, he is often sentimental. But having said that, I have said most of what might be said against him. The best pages here, as in his one other great work, *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941), are white-hot and inspired, both funny and terrible, a man's attempt to tell the whole truth about the life that he has known. Miller is one of the few modern writers who can move a reader to tears, quite simply, by the pressure of his own feeling. He can also communicate, and induce in the reader, a delicious delight in the fact of

being alive. I never read Miller on song without feeling better, happier, more myself and less alone, for having done so.

On the ovarian trolley

Foreword to *Historia Calamitatum*

(the story of my misfortunes)

Often the hearts of men and women are stirred, as likewise they are soothed in their sorrows, more by example than by words. And therefore, because I too have known some consolation from speech had with one who was a witness thereof, am I now minded to write of the sufferings which have sprung out of my misfortunes, for the eyes of one who, though absent, is of himself ever a consoler. This I do so that, in comparing your sorrows with mine, you may discover that yours are in truth nought, or at the most but of small account, and so you shall come to bear them more easily.

Peter Abelard

Tropic of Capricorn

ONCE you have given up the ghost, everything follows with dead certainty, even in the midst of chaos. From the beginning it was never anything but chaos: it was a fluid which enveloped me, which I breathed in through the gills. In the sub-strata, where the moon shone steady and opaque, it was smooth and fecundating; above it was a jangle and a discord. In everything I quickly saw the opposite, the contradiction, and between the real and the unreal the irony, the paradox. I was my own worst enemy. There was nothing I wished to do which I could just as well not do. Even as a child, when I lacked for nothing, I wanted to die: I wanted to surrender because I saw no sense in struggling. I felt that nothing would be proved, substantiated, added or subtracted by continuing an existence which I had not asked for. Everybody around me was a failure, or if not a failure, ridiculous. Especially the successful ones. The successful ones bored me to tears. I was sympathetic to a fault, but it was not sympathy that made me so. It was a purely negative quality, a weakness which blossomed at the mere sight of human misery. I never helped any one expecting that it would do any good; I helped because I was helpless to do otherwise. To want to change the condition of affairs seemed futile to me; nothing would be altered, I was convinced, except by a change of heart, and who could change the hearts of men? Now and then a friend was converted; it was something to make me puke. I had no more need of God than He had of me, and if there were one, I often said to myself, I would meet Him calmly and spit in His face.

What was most annoying was that at first blush people usually took me to be good, to be kind, generous, loyal, faithful. Perhaps I did possess these virtues but if so it was because I was indifferent: I could afford to be good, kind, generous, loyal, and so forth, since I was free of envy. Envy was the one thing I was never a victim of. I have never envied anybody or anything. On the contrary, I have only felt pity for everybody and everything.

From the very beginning I must have trained myself not to want anything too badly. From the very beginning I was independent, in a false way. I had need of nobody because I wanted to be free, free to do and to give only as my whims dictated. The moment anything was expected or demanded of me I balked. That was the form my independence took. I was corrupt, in other words, corrupt from the start. It's as though my mother fed

me a poison, and though I was weaned young the poison never left my system. Even when she weaned me it seemed that I was completely indifferent; most children rebel, or make a pretense of rebelling, but I didn't give a damn, I was a philosopher when still in swaddling clothes. I was against life, on principle. What principle? The principle of futility. Everybody around me was struggling. I myself never made an effort. If I appeared to be making an effort it was only to please someone else; at bottom I didn't give a rap. And if you can tell me why this should have been so I will deny it, because I was born with a cursed streak in me and nothing can eliminate it. I heard later, when I had grown up, that they had a hell of a time bringing me out of the womb. I can understand that perfectly. Why budge? Why come out of a nice warm place, a cosy retreat in which everything is offered you gratis? The earliest remembrance I have is of the cold, the snow and ice in the gutter, the frost on the window panes, the chill of the sweaty green walls in the kitchen. Why do people live in outlandish climates in the *temperate* zones, as they are miscalled? Because people are naturally idiots, naturally sluggards, naturally cowards. Until I was about ten years old I never realized that there were "warm" countries, places where you didn't have to sweat for a living, nor shiver and pretend that it was tonic and exhilarating. Wherever there is cold there are people who work themselves to the bone and when they produce young they preach to the young the gospel of work – which is nothing, at bottom, but the doctrine of inertia. My people were entirely Nordic, which is to say *idiots*. Every wrong idea which has ever been expounded was theirs. Among them was the doctrine of cleanliness, to say nothing of righteousness. They were painfully clean. But inwardly they stank. Never once had they opened the door which leads to the soul; never once did they dream of taking a blind leap into the dark. After dinner the dishes were promptly washed and put in the closet; after the paper was read it was neatly folded and laid away on a shelf; after the clothes were washed they were ironed and folded and then tucked away in the drawers. Everything was for tomorrow, but tomorrow never came. The present was only a bridge and on this bridge they are still groaning, as the world groans, and not one idiot ever thinks of blowing up the bridge.

In my bitterness I often search for reasons to condemn them, the better to condemn myself. For I am like them too, in many ways. For a long while I thought I had escaped, but as time goes on I see that I am no better, that I am even a little worse, because I saw more clearly than they ever did and yet remained powerless to alter my life. As I look back on my life it seems to me that I never did anything of my own volition but always through the pressure of others. People often think of me as an adventurous fellow; nothing could be farther from the truth. My adventures were always adventitious, always thrust on me, always endured rather than undertaken. I am of the very essence of that proud, boastful Nordic people who have never had the least sense of adventure but who nevertheless have scoured

the earth, turned it upside down, scattering relics and ruins everywhere. Restless spirits, but not adventurous ones. Agonizing spirits, incapable of living in the present. Disgraceful cowards, all of them, myself included. For there is only one great adventure and that is inward towards the self, and for that, time nor space nor even deeds matter.

Once every few years I was on the verge of making this discovery, but in characteristic fashion I always managed to dodge the issue. If I try to think of a good excuse I can think only of the environment, of the streets I knew and the people who inhabited them. I can think of no street in America, or of people inhabiting such a street, capable of leading one on towards the discovery of the self. I have walked the streets in many countries of the world but nowhere have I felt so degraded and humiliated as in America. I think of all the streets in America combined as forming a huge cesspool, a cesspool of the spirit in which everything is sucked down and drained away to everlasting shit. Over this cesspool the spirit of work weaves a magic wand; palaces and factories spring up side by side, and munition plants and chemical works and steel mills and sanatoriums and prisons and insane asylums. The whole continent is a nightmare producing the greatest misery of the greatest number. I was one, a single entity in the midst of the greatest jamboree of wealth and happiness (statistical wealth, statistical happiness) but I never met a man who was truly wealthy or truly happy. At least I knew that I was unhappy, unwealthy, out of whack and out of step. That was my only solace, my only joy. But it was hardly enough. It would have been better for my peace of mind, for my soul if I had expressed my rebellion openly, if I had gone to jail for it, if I had rotted there and died. It would have been better if, like the mad Czolgosz, I had shot some good President McKinley, some gentle, insignificant soul like that who had never done anyone the least harm. Because in the bottom of my heart there was murder: I wanted to see America destroyed, razed from top to bottom. I wanted to see this happen purely out of vengeance, as atonement for the crimes that were committed against me and against others like me who have never been able to lift their voices and express their hatred, their rebellion, their legitimate blood lust.

I was the evil product of an evil soil. If the self were not imperishable, the "I" I write about would have been destroyed long ago. To some this may seem like an invention, but whatever I imagine to have happened did actually happen, *at least to me*. History may deny it, since I have played no part in the history of my people, but even if everything I say is wrong, is prejudiced, spiteful, malevolent, even if I am a liar and a poisoner, it is nevertheless the truth and it will have to be swallowed. As to what happened ...

Everything that happens, when it has significance, is in the nature of a contradiction. Until the one for whom this is written came along I imagined that somewhere outside, in life, as they say, lay the solutions to all things. I

thought, when I came upon her, that I was seizing hold of life, seizing hold of something which I could bite into. Instead I lost hold of life completely. I reached out for something to attach myself to – and I found nothing. But in reaching out, in the effort to grasp, to attach myself, left high and dry as I was, I nevertheless found something I had not looked for – *myself*. I found that what I had desired all my life was not to live – if what others are doing is called living – but to express myself. I realized that I had never the least interest in living, but only in this which I am doing now, something which is parallel to life, of it at the same time, and beyond it. What is true interests me scarcely at all, nor even what is real; only that interests me which I imagine to be, that which I had stifled every day in order to live. Whether I die today or tomorrow is of no importance to me, never has been, but that today even, after years of effort, I cannot say what I think and feel – that bothers me, that rankles. From childhood on I can see myself on the track of this spectre, enjoying nothing, desiring nothing but this power, this ability. Everything else is a lie – everything I ever did or said which did not bear upon this. And that is pretty much the greater part of my life.

I was a contradiction in essence, as they say. People took me to be serious and high-minded, or to be gay and reckless, or to be sincere and earnest, or to be negligent and carefree. I was all these things at once – and beyond that I was something else, something which no one suspected, least of all myself. As a boy of six or seven I used to sit at my grandfather's workbench and read to him while he sewed. I remember him vividly in those moments when, pressing the hot iron against the seam of a coat, he would stand with one hand over the other and look out of the window dreamily. I remember the expression on his face, as he stood there dreaming, better than the contents of the books I read, better than the conversations we had or the games which I played in the street. I used to wonder what he was dreaming of, what it was that drew him out of himself. I hadn't learned yet how to dream wideawake. I was always lucid, in the moment, and all of a piece. His daydreaming fascinated me. I knew that he had no connection with what he was doing, not the least thought for any of us, that he was alone and being alone he was free. I was never alone, least of all when I was by myself. Always, it seems to me, I was accompanied: I was like a little crumb of a big cheese, which was the world, I suppose, though I never stopped to think about it. But I know I never existed separately, never thought myself the big cheese, as it were. So that even when I had reason to be miserable, to complain, to weep, I had the illusion of participating in a common, a universal misery. When I wept the whole world was weeping – so I imagined. I wept very seldom. Mostly I was happy, I was laughing, I was having a good time. I had a good time because, as I said before, I really didn't give a fuck about anything. If things were wrong with me they were wrong everywhere, I was convinced of it.

And things were wrong usually only when one cared too much. That impressed itself on me very early in life. For example, I remember the case of my young friend Jack Lawson. For a whole year he lay in bed, suffering the worst agonies. He was my best friend, so people said at any rate. Well, at first I was probably sorry for him and perhaps now and then I called at his house to inquire about him; but after a month or two had elapsed I grew quite callous about his suffering. I said to myself he ought to die and the sooner he dies the better it will be, and having thought thus I acted accordingly, that is to say, I promptly forgot about him, abandoned him to his fate. I was only about twelve years old at the time and I remember being proud of my decision. I remember the funeral too – what a disgraceful affair it was. There they were, friends and relatives all congregated about the bier and all of them bawling like sick monkeys. The mother especially gave me a pain in the ass. She was such a rare, spiritual creature, a Christian Scientist, I believe, and though she didn't believe in disease and didn't believe in death either, she raised such a stink that Christ himself would have risen from the grave. But not her beloved Jack! No, Jack lay there cold as ice and rigid and unbeckonable. He was dead and there were no two ways about it. I knew it and I was glad of it. I didn't waste any tears over it. I couldn't say that he was better off because after all the "he" had vanished. *He* was gone and with him the sufferings he had endured and the suffering he had unwittingly inflicted on others. Amen! I said to myself, and with that, being slightly hysterical, I let a loud fart – right beside the coffin.

This caring too much – I remember that it only developed with me about the time I first fell in love. And even then I didn't care enough. If I had really cared I wouldn't be here now writing about it: I'd have died of a broken heart, or I'd have swung for it. It was a bad experience because it taught me how to live a lie. It taught me to smile when I didn't want to smile, to work when I didn't believe in work, to live when I had no reason to go on living. Even when I had forgotten her I still retained the trick of doing what I didn't believe in.

I was all chaos from the beginning, as I have said. But sometimes I got so close to the centre, to the very heart of the confusion, that it's a wonder things didn't explode around me.

It is customary to blame everything on the war. I say the war had nothing to do with me, with my life. At a time when others were getting themselves comfortable berths I was taking one miserable job after another, and never enough in it to keep body and soul together. Almost as quickly as I was hired I was fired. I had plenty of intelligence but I inspired distrust. Where-ever I went I fomented discord – not because I was idealistic but because I was like a searchlight exposing the stupidity and futility of everything. Besides, I wasn't a good ass-licker. That marked me, no doubt. People could tell at once when I asked for a job that I really didn't give a damn whether I got it or not. And of course I generally didn't get it. But

after a time the mere looking for a job became an activity, a pastime, so to speak. I would go in and ask for most anything. It was a way of killing time – now worse, as far as I could see, than work itself. I was my own boss and I had my own hours, but unlike other bosses I entrained only my own ruin, my own bankruptcy. I was not a corporation or a trust or a state or a federation or a polity of nations – I was more like God, if anything.

This went on from about the middle of the war until ... well, until one day I was trapped. Finally the day came when I did desperately want a job. I needed it. Not having another minute to lose, I decided that I would take the last job on earth, that of messenger boy. I walked into the employment bureau of the telegraph company – the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company of North America – towards the close of the day, prepared to go through with it. I had just come from the public library and I had under my arm some fat books on economics and metaphysics. To my great amazement I was refused the job.

The guy who turned me down was a little runt who ran the switchboard. He seemed to take me for a college student, though it was clear enough from my application that I had long left school. I had even honoured myself on the application with a Ph.D. degree from Columbia University. Apparently that passed unnoticed, or else was suspiciously regarded by this runt who had turned me down. I was furious, the more so because for once in my life I was in earnest. Not only that, but I had swallowed my pride, which in certain peculiar ways is rather large. My wife of course gave me the usual leer and sneer. I had done it as a gesture, she said. I went to bed thinking about it, still smarting, getting angrier and angrier as the night wore on. The fact that I had a wife and child to support didn't bother me so much; people didn't offer you jobs because you had a family to support, that much I understood only too well. No, what rankled was that they had rejected *me*, Henry V. Miller, a competent, superior individual who had asked for the lowest job in the world. That burned me up. I couldn't get over it. In the morning I was up bright and early, shaved, put on my best clothes and hot-footed it to the subway. I went immediately to the main offices of the telegraph company ... up to the 25th floor or wherever it was that the president and the vice-presidents had their cubicles. I asked to see the president. Of course the president was either out of town or too busy to see me, but wouldn't I care to see the vice-president, or his secretary rather. I saw the vice-president's secretary, an intelligent, considerate sort of chap, and I gave him an earful. I did it adroitly, without too much heat, but letting him understand all the while that I wasn't to be put out of the way so easily.

When he picked up the telephone and demanded the general manager I thought it was just a gag, that they were going to pass me around like that from one to the other until I'd get fed up. But the moment I heard him talk I changed my opinion. When I got to the general manager's office, which was in another building uptown, they were waiting for me. I sat down in a

comfortable leather chair and accepted one of the big cigars that were thrust forward. This individual seemed at once to be vitally concerned about the matter. He wanted me to tell him all about it, down to the last detail, his big hairy ears cocked to catch the least crumb of information which would justify something or other which was formulating itself inside his dome. I realized that by some accident I had really been instrumental in doing him a service. I let him wheedle it out of me to suit his fancy, observing all the time which way the wind was blowing. And as the talk progressed I noticed that he was warming up to me more and more. At last some one was showing a little confidence in me! That was all I required to get started on one of my favourite lines. For, after years of job hunting I had naturally become quite adept; I knew not only what *not* to say, but I knew also what to imply, what to insinuate. Soon the assistant general manager was called in and asked to listen to my story. By this time I knew what the story was. I understood that Hymie – “that little kike”, as the general manager called him – had no business pretending that he was the employment manager. Hymie had usurped his prerogative, that much was clear. It was also clear that Hymie was a Jew and that Jews were not in good odour with the general manager, nor with Mr. Twilliger, the vice-president, who was a thorn in the general manager’s side.

Perhaps it was Hymie, “the dirty little kike” who was responsible for the high percentage of Jews on the messenger force. Perhaps Hymie was really the one who was doing the hiring at the employment office – at Sunset Place, they called it. It was an excellent opportunity, I gathered, for Mr. Clancy, the general manager, to take down a certain Mr. Burns who, he informed me, had been the employment manager for some thirty years now and who was evidently getting lazy on the job.

The conference lasted several hours. Before it was terminated Mr. Clancy took me aside and informed me that he was going to make *me* the boss of the Works. Before putting me into office, however, he was going to ask me as a special favour, and also as a sort of apprenticeship which would stand me in good stead, to work as a special messenger. I would receive the salary of employment manager, but it would be paid me out of a separate account. In short I was to float from office to office and observe the way affairs were conducted by all and sundry. I was to make a little report from time to time as to how things were going. And once in a while, so he suggested, I was to visit him at his home on the q.t. and have a little chat about the conditions in the hundred and one branches of the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company in New York City. In other words I was to be a spy for a few months and after that I was to have the run of the joint. Maybe they’d make me a general manager too one day, or a vice-president. It was a tempting offer, even if it was wrapped up in a lot of horse shit. I said Yes.

In a few months I was sitting at Sunset Place hiring and firing like a demon. It was a slaughter-house, so help me God. The thing was senseless

from the bottom up. A waste of men, material and effort. A hideous farce against a backdrop of sweat and misery. But just as I had accepted the spying so I accepted the hiring and firing and all that went with it. I said Yes to everything. If the vice-president decreed that no cripples were to be hired I hired no cripples. If the vice-president said that all messengers over forty-five were to be fired without notice I fired them without notice. I did everything they instructed me to do, but in such a way that they had to pay for it. When there was a strike I folded my arms and waited for it to blow over. But I first saw to it that it cost them a good penny. The whole system was so rotten, so inhuman, so lousy, so hopelessly corrupt and complicated, that it would have taken a genius to put any sense or order into it, to say nothing of human kindness or consideration. I was up against the whole rotten system of American labour, which is rotten at both ends. I was the fifth wheel on the wagon and neither side had any use for me, except to exploit me. In fact, everybody was being exploited – the president and his gang by the unseen powers, the employees by the officials, and so on and around, in and out and through the whole works. From my little perch at “Sunset Place” I had a bird’s eye view of the whole American society. It was like a page out of the telephone book. Alphabetically, numerically, statistically, it made sense. But when you looked at it up close, when you examined the pages separately, or the parts separately, when you examined one lone individual and what constituted him, examined the air he breathed, the life he led, the chances he risked, you saw something so foul and degrading, so low, so miserable, so utterly hopeless and senseless, that it was worse than looking into a volcano. You could see the whole American life – economically, politically, morally, spiritually, artistically, statistically, pathologically. It looked like a grand chancre on a worn-out cock. It looked worse than that, really, because you couldn’t even see anything resembling a cock any more. Maybe in the past this thing had life, did produce something, did at least give a moment’s pleasure, a moment’s thrill. But looking at it from where I sat it looked rottener than the wormiest cheese. The wonder was that the stench of it didn’t carry’em off ... I’m using the past tense all the time, but of course it’s the same now, maybe even a bit worse. At least now we’re getting it full stink.

By the time Valeska arrived on the scene I had hired several army corps of messengers. My office at Sunset Place was like an open sewer, and it stank like one. I had dug myself into the first line trench and I was getting it from all directions at once. To begin with, the man I had ousted died of a broken heart a few weeks after my arrival. He held out just long enough to break me in and then he croaked. Things happened so fast that I didn’t have a chance to feel guilty. From the moment I arrived at the office it was one long uninterrupted pandemonium. An hour before my arrival – I was always late – the place was already jammed with applicants. I had to elbow my way up the stairs and literally force my way in to get there. Hymie was worse off than I because he was tied to the barricade. Before I could take

my hat off I had to answer a dozen telephone calls. There were three telephones on my desk and they all rang at once. They were bawling the piss out of me before I had even sat down to work. There wasn't even time to take a crap – until five or six in the afternoon. Hymie was worse off than I because he was tied to the switchboard. He sat there from eight in the morning, until six, moving waybills around. A waybill was a messenger loaned by one office to another office for the day or a part of the day. None of the hundred and one offices ever had a full staff; Hymie had to play chess with the waybills while I worked like a madman to plug up the gaps. If by a miracle I succeeded in a day of filling all the vacancies, the next morning would find the situation exactly the same – or worse. Perhaps twenty per cent of the force were steady; the rest was driftwood. The steady ones drove the new ones away. The steady ones earned forty to fifty dollars a week, sometimes sixty or seventy-five, sometimes as much as a hundred dollars a week, which is to say that they earned far more than the clerks and often more than their own managers. As for the new ones, they found it difficult to earn ten dollars a week. Some of them worked an hour and quit, often throwing a batch of telegrams in the garbage can or down the sewer. And whenever they quit they wanted their pay immediately, which was impossible, because in the complicated bookkeeping which ruled no one could say what a messenger had earned until at least ten days later. In the beginning I invited the applicant to sit down beside me and I explained everything to him in detail. I did that until I lost my voice. Soon I learned to save my strength for the grilling that was necessary. In the first place, every other boy was a born liar if not a crook to boot. Many of them had already been hired and fired a number of times. Some found it an excellent way to find another job, because their duty brought them to hundreds of offices which normally they would never have set foot in. Fortunately McGovern, the old trusty who guarded the door and handed out the application blanks, had a camera eye. And then there were the big ledgers behind me, in which there was a record of every applicant who had ever passed through the mill. The ledgers were very much like a police record; they were full of red ink marks, signifying this or that delinquency. To judge from the evidence I was in a tough spot. Every other name involved a theft, fraud, a brawl, or dementia or perversion or idiocy. “Be careful – so-and-so is an epileptic!” “Don't hire this man – he's a nigger!” “Watch out – X has been in Dannemora – or else in Sing Sing.”

If I had been a stickler for etiquette nobody would ever have been hired. I had to learn quickly, and not from the records or from those about me, but from experience. There were a thousand and one details by which to judge an applicant: I had to take them all in at once, and quickly, because in one short day, even if you are as fast as Jack Robinson, you can only hire so many and no more. And no matter how many I hired it was never enough. The next day it would begin all over again. Some I knew would last only a day, but I had to hire them just the same. The system was

wrong from start to finish, but it was not my place to criticize the system. It was mine to hire and fire. I was in the centre of a revolving disk which was whirling so fast that nothing could stay put. What was needed was a mechanic, but according to the logic of the higher-ups there was nothing wrong with the mechanism, everything was fine and dandy except that things were temporarily out of order. And things being temporarily out of order brought on epilepsy, theft, vandalism, perversion, niggers, Jews, whores and whatnot – sometimes strikes and lockouts. Whereupon, according to this logic, you took a big broom and you swept the stable clean, or you took clubs and guns and you beat sense into the poor idiots who were suffering from the illusion that things were fundamentally wrong. It was good now and then to talk of God, or to have a little community sing – maybe even a bonus was justifiable now and then, that is when things were getting too terribly bad for words. But on the whole, the important thing was to keep hiring and firing; as long as there were men and ammunition we were to advance, to keep mopping up the trenches. Meanwhile Hymie kept taking cathartic pills – enough to blow out his rear end if he had had a rear end, but he hadn't one any more, he only imagined he was taking a crap, he only imagined he was shitting on his can. Actually the poor bugger was in a trance. There were a hundred and one offices to look after and each one had a staff of messengers which was mythical, if not hypothetical, and whether the messengers were real or unreal, tangible or intangible, Hymie had to shuffle them about from morning to night while I plugged up the holes, which was also imaginary because who could say when a recruit had been dispatched to an office whether he would arrive there today or tomorrow or never. Some of them got lost in the subway or in the labyrinths under the skyscrapers; some rode around on the elevated line all day because with a uniform it was a free ride and perhaps they had never enjoyed riding around all day on the elevated lines. Some of them started for Staten Island and ended up in Canarsie, or else were brought back in a coma by a cop. Some forgot where they lived and disappeared completely. Some whom we hired for New York turned up in Philadelphia a month later as though it were normal and according to Hoyle. Some would start for their destination and on the way decide that it was easier to sell newspapers and they would sell them in the uniform we had given them, until they were picked up. Some went straight to the observation ward, moved by some strange preservative instinct.

When he arrived in the morning Hymie first sharpened his pencils; he did this religiously no matter how many calls were coming in, because, as he explained to me later, if he didn't sharpen the pencils first thing off the bat they would never get sharpened. The next thing was to take a glance out the window and see what the weather was like. Then, with a freshly sharpened pencil he made a little box at the head of the slate which he kept beside him and in it he gave the weather report. This, he also informed me, often turned out to be a useful alibi If the snow were a foot thick or the

ground covered with sleet, even the devil himself might be excused for not shuffling the waybills around more speedily, and the employment manager might also be excused for not filling up the holes on such days, no? But why he didn't take a crap first instead of plugging in on the switchboard soon as his pencils were sharpened was a mystery to me. That too he explained to me later. Anyway, the day always broke with confusion, complaints, constipation and vacancies. It also began with loud smelly farts, with bad breaths, with ragged nerves, with epilepsy, with meningitis, with low wages, with back pay that was overdue, with worn-out shoes, with corns and bunions, with flat feet and broken arches, with pocket books missing and fountain pens lost or stolen, with telegrams floating in the sewer, with threats from the vice-president and advice from the managers, with wrangles and disputes, with cloudbursts and broken telegraph wires, with new methods of efficiency and old ones that had been discarded, with hope for better times and a prayer for the bonus which never came. The new messengers were going over the top and getting machine-gunned; the old ones were digging in deeper and deeper, like rats in a cheese. Nobody was satisfied, especially not the public. It took ten minutes to reach San Francisco over the wire, but it might take a year to get the message to the man whom it was intended for – or it might never reach him.

The Y.M.C.A., eager to improve the morale of working boys everywhere in America, were holding meetings at noon hour and wouldn't I like to send a few spruce-looking boys to hear William Carnegie Asterbilt Junior give a five minute talk on service. Mr. Mallory of the Welfare League would like to know if I could spare a few minutes some time to tell me about the model prisoners who were on parole and who would be glad to serve in any capacity, even as messengers. Mrs. Guggenhoffer of the Jewish Charities would be very grateful if I would aid her in maintaining some broken-down homes which had broken down because everybody was either infirm, crippled or disabled in the family. Mr. Haggerty of the Runaway Home for Boys was sure he had just the right youngsters for me, if only I would give them a chance; all of them had been mistreated by their stepfathers or stepmothers. The Mayor of New York would appreciate it if I would give my personal attention to the bearer of the said letter whom he could vouch for in every way – but why the hell he didn't give said bearer a job himself was a mystery. Man leaning over my shoulder hands me a slip of paper on which he has just written – "Me understand everything but me no hear the voices." Luther Winifred is standing beside him, his tattered coat fastened together with safety pins. Luther is two sevenths pure Indian and five sevenths German-American, so he explains. On the Indian side he is a Crow, one of the Crows from Montana. His last job was putting up window shades, but there is no ass in his pants and he is ashamed to climb a ladder in front of a lady. He got out of the hospital the other day and so he is still a little weak, but he is not too weak to carry messages, so he thinks.

And then there is Ferdinand Mish – how could I have forgotten him? He has been waiting in line all morning to get a word with me. I never answered the letters he sent me. Was that just? he asks me blandly. Of course not. I remember vaguely the last letter he sent me from the Cat and Dog Hospital on the Grand Concourse, where he was an attendant. He said he repented that he had resigned his post “but it was on account of his father being too strict over him, not giving him any recreation or outside pleasure’. “I’m twenty-five now,” he wrote, “and I don’t think I should ought to be sleeping no more with my father, do you? I know you are said to be a very fine gentleman and I am now self-dependent, so I hope ...” McGovern, the old trusty, is standing by Ferdinand’s side waiting for me to give him the sign. He wants to give Ferdinand the bum’s rush – he remembers him from five years ago when Ferdinand lay down on the sidewalk in front of the main office in full uniform and threw an epileptic fit. No, shit, I can’t do it! I’m going to give him a chance, the poor bastard. Maybe I’ll send him to Chinatown where things are fairly quiet. Meanwhile, while Ferdinand is changing into a uniform in the back room, I’m getting an earful from an orphan boy who wants to “help make the company a success’. He says that if I give him a chance he’ll pray for me every Sunday when he goes to church, except the Sundays when he has to report to his parole officer. He didn’t do nothing, it appears. He just pushed the fellow and the fellow fell on his head and got killed. *Next:* An ex-consul from Gibraltar. Writes a beautiful hand – too beautiful. I ask him to see me at the end of the day – something fishy about him. Meanwhile Ferdinand’s thrown a fit in the dressing room. Lucky break! If it had happened in the subway, with a number on his hat and everything, I’d have been canned. *Next:* A guy with one arm and mad as hell because McGovern is showing him the door. “What the hell! I’m strong and healthy, ain’t I?” he shouts, and to prove it he picks up a chair with his good arm and smashes it to bits. I get back to the desk and there’s a telegram lying there for me. I open it. It’s from George Blasini, ex-messenger No. 2459 of S.W. office. “I am sorry that I had to quit so soon, but the job was not fitted for my character idleness and I am a true lover of labour and frugality but many a time we be unable to control or subdue our personal pride.” Shit!

In the beginning I was enthusiastic, despite the damper above and the clamps below. I had ideas and I executed them, whether it pleased the vice-president or not. Every ten days or so I was put on the carpet and lectured for having “too big a heart”. I never had any money in my pocket but I used other people’s money freely. As long as I was the boss I had credit. I gave money away right and left; I gave my clothes away and my linen, my books, everything that was superfluous. If I had had the power I would have given the company away to the poor buggers who pestered me. If I was asked for a dime I gave a half dollar, if I was asked for a dollar I gave five. I didn’t give a fuck how much I gave away, because it was easier to borrow and give than to refuse the poor devils. I never saw such an

aggregation of misery in my life, and I hope I'll never see it again. Men are poor everywhere – they always have been and they always will be. And beneath the terrible poverty there is a flame, usually so low that it is almost invisible. But it is there and if one has the courage to blow on it it can become a conflagration. I was constantly urged not to be too lenient, not to be too sentimental, not to be too charitable. Be firm! Be hard! they cautioned me. Fuck that! I said to myself, I'll be generous, pliant, forgiving, tolerant, tender. In the beginning I heard every man to the end; if I couldn't give him a job I gave him money, and if I had no money I gave him cigarettes or I gave him courage. But I gave! The effect was dizzying. Nobody can estimate the results of a good deed, of a kind word. I was swamped with gratitude, with good wishes, with invitations, with pathetic, tender little gifts. If I had had real power, instead of being the fifth wheel on a wagon, God knows what I might have accomplished. I could have used the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company of North America as a base to bring all humanity to God; I could have transformed North and South America alike, and the Dominion of Canada too. I had the secret in my hand: it was to be generous, to be kind, to be patient. I did the work of five men. I hardly slept for three years. I didn't own a whole shirt and often I was so ashamed of borrowing from my wife, or robbing the kid's bank, that to get the car fare to go to work in the morning I would swindle the blind newspaperman at the subway station. I owed so much money all around that if I were to work for twenty years I would not have been able to pay it back. I took from those who had and I gave to those who needed, and it was the right thing to do, and I would do it all over again if I were in the same position.

I even accomplished the miracle of stopping the crazy turnover, something that nobody had dared to hope for. Instead of supporting my efforts they undermined me. According to the logic of the higher-ups the turnover had ceased because the wages were too high. So they cut the wages. It was like kicking the bottom out of a bucket. The whole edifice tumbled, collapsed on my hands. And, just as though nothing had happened they insisted that the gaps be plugged up immediately. To soften the blow a bit they intimated that I might even increase the percentage of Jews, I might take on a cripple now and then, if he were capable, I might do this and that, all of which they had informed me previously was against the code. I was so furious that I took on anything and everything; I would have taken on broncos and gorillas if I could have imbued them with the modicum of intelligence which was necessary to deliver messages. A few days previously there had been only five or six vacancies at closing time. Now there were three hundred, four hundred, five hundred – they were running out like sand. It was marvellous. I sat there and without asking a question I took them on in carload lots – niggers, Jews, paralytics, cripples, ex-convicts, whores, maniacs, perverts, idiots, any fucking bastard who could stand on two legs and hold a telegram in his hand. The managers of