

THE SENTIMENTALISTS

A downtown department store. A store detective watches three women customers. Two bored young men make a bet with each other: Which of the three is really the thief?

It was at the scarf counter at noontime that Jack Malone, the young law student, saw the yellow scarf on the rack and thought he might give it to his girl for her birthday. His plump friend, Fred Webster, bored with wandering around from counter to counter in the department store, had just said, "Sure she'll like it. Take it," when a gray-haired woman in a blue sailor hat came gliding round the corner and bumped into Malone. "Excuse me, lady," he said, but she was in his way, idly toying with the yellow scarf. "Excuse me, madam," he said firmly. Moving a step away, she said impatiently, "Excuse me," and went on fussing with the scarves without actually looking at them, and when the salesgirl approached she didn't look up. Reddening, the salesgirl retreated quickly, leaving her there peering through the screen of scarves at the silk-stocking counter in the next aisle.

"Why get sore? She's the store detective. You got in her way," Webster said.

"Why shouldn't I? I don't work for her."

"It's someone at the silk-stocking counter," Webster said, brightening. "Let's watch."

Because they were having a sale, silk stockings were out loose on the counter and sometimes there was a line of women and sometimes the line thinned out.

"If you were a betting man, who would you say it was? Webster asked He knew Malone was proud of his judgment of people and of the experience he got from talking to crooks of all kinds in the law office and in the police court. "I'll bet you five bucks, Webster said. "Go ahead, look over the field."

"It's too easy," Malone said. All he had to do was watch the detective behind the scarves and follow the direction of her eyes, watching three women at the end of the silk-stocking counter who had been standing there longer than the others. It was hard to get more than a glimpse of their faces, but one was a stout woman with a silver-fox fur and a dark, heavy, aggressive, and arrogant face. She looked very shrewd and competent. Her lips were heavy and greedy. If she were going to steal anything it would probably be something very valuable, and she wouldn't give it up easily. On the left of her was a lanky schoolgirl with no shape at all, a brainless-looking kid. And there was a young girl in a red felt hat and a fawn-colored loose spring coat.

All the women at the counter seemed to be sliding stockings over the backs of their hands and holding them up to the light. Getting a little closer, his excitement quickening, Malone tried to see into their faces and into their lives, and the first one he counted out was the girl in the fawn coat: she seemed like someone he had met on a train, or someone he had known all his life without ever knowing her name. In a hundred places they might have seen each other, at summer dances or on the streets where he had played when he was a kid. But while he was watching her and feeling sure of her, the schoolgirl sighed and dropped the stocking she was looking at and walked away.

"That leaves only the two," Webster whispered, coming alongside. His plump, good-natured face was disturbed, as if he, too, had decided the stout woman was far too sensible-looking to be a store thief, and his estimate of the girl in the fawn coat with the dark hair and the brown eyes was the same as Malone's. "I was thinking it would be the school kid doing something crazy," he whispered.

"So was I."

While they stood together, suddenly disturbed, the stout woman made a purchase and walked away slowly, opening her purse. They both turned, watching the bright-colored bank of scarves, and Malone suddenly longed to see the blue sailor hat go gliding behind the scarves, following the stout woman. But the detective was still there, waiting. You could see the motionless rim of her hat.

"Well, it's the girl in the fawn coat she's watching," Webster said.

"And what do you think?"

"I think the detective's crazy."

"Yet she's the one the woman's watching."

"Listen, I'll bet you that five bucks old eagle eye hiding over there is absolutely wrong about her."

"Not on your life. That's no bet. That kid's no thief," Malone said.

It wasn't just that the girl was pretty. But in the slow way she turned her head, swinging the dark hair over her raised collar, in the light of intelligence that shone in her dark eyes when she looked up quickly, and in the warmth that would surely come easily in her face, Malone was reminded that she might be someone like his own sister. Her clothes were not expensive: the fawn coat looked as if it had been worn at least three seasons. But his sister had looked like that the time they were all scrimping and saving to send her to college. Suddenly, Malone and Webster were joined, betting against the judgment of the store detective. They wanted to root for the girl, root her away from the counter. With a passionate eagerness to see the woman detective frustrated, Malone muttered in her direction, "Lady, you're picking on the wrong party. Just stick around awhile and watch her walk away."

But the store detective's blue sailor hat was moving slowly, coming around, closing in. Yet the girl stood motionless. A stocking was in her hand, or her hand was on the counter, and her absent-minded stillness, her lowered head – it became apparent – were a furtive awareness of the position of the salesgirl. Malone went to speak to Webster, and then he couldn't: they were both unbelieving and hurt. Yet there still was a chance. It became a desperate necessity that he should be right about the girl. "Go away, kid," he was begging her. "Why do you stand there looking like that? You're no thief. You're a kid. Get moving, why don't you?" But she bent her head, she hunched up her shoulders a little, and her hand on the counter was drawing a pair of silk stockings into the wide sleeve of her coat. As the store detective came slowly around the end of the scarf counter, Webster said, disgusted, "Just another little store thief."

Malone wanted to slap the girl and abuse her. It wasn't just that she had let him down, she seemed to have betrayed so many things that belonged to the most intimate and warmest part of his life. "Let her arrest her, what do we care?" he said as the store detective went slowly down the aisle. But in spite of himself he thought he would cry out if he stood there. He got excited. He walked along the aisle alone, taking out his watch as if he had been waiting a longtime for someone. When he was opposite the girl he stopped, staring at her back, at the bunch of black curls under the rim of her hat, and he was sick and hesitant and bewildered. "Why, Helen," he said, reaching out and touching her, "have you been here all this time?" A wide, forced smile was on his face.

"Smile, please smile," he whispered, because he could see the store detective watching them. "Come away," he begged her. "They're watching you."

Before the scared smile came on her face, the silk stockings rolled in a ball in her palm and half up her sleeve were dropped almost naturally on the counter. She made it look like a careless gesture. "Hello," she said, "I was ..." then her voice was lost. If he had not moved she would have stood gaping and incredulous, but he was scared for himself now, for he might be arrested as an accomplice, and he linked his arm under hers and started to walk down the aisle to the door.

They had to pass the store detective, and maybe it was because Malone instinctively tightened his hold on the girl's arm that he could feel it trembling. But the store detective, frustrated and puzzled, seemed to smile cynically just as they passed; he hated her for being right about the girl.

When they got outside, they stopped a moment under the big clock. It had been raining out, but there was bright sunlight on the wet pavements and the noonday crowd surged by. In that bright light, as he stood hesitating and the girl's head was lowered in humiliation, he noticed that there seemed to be a hundred little spots on her light coat, maybe rain marks or dust and rain. His heart was pounding, but now that he had got her safely out of the store, he wanted to get rid of her, and he didn't want her to offer any of that servile gratitude he got from petty thieves he helped in the police court.

"Thanks," she whispered.

"Forget it," he said, as if the whole thing had been nothing to him and he had understood from the

beginning what she was. "I guess you'd better be getting on your way "

"All right."

"Well, there's no use standing here. Aren't you going along?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, standing there staring at him, her face still full of humiliation.

"You better be heading somewhere out of here. Where are you from?" he asked awkwardly.

"Out of town," she said. Then she touched him on the arm. "Listen, what was the idea?" she asked.

While she waited for him to answer her face seemed to brighten. She was looking at him, looking right into his eyes. "Why did you do it? What's it to you?" They seemed to be alone on the street while she waited breathlessly because she had been offered some incredible promise, a turn that gave her a wild hope.

"We were standing there watching," he said uneasily, as he nodded to Webster who had followed them out and was now standing by the window trying to hear what she said. "Me and my pal, we saw what was going on," Malone said. Then, remembering their disappointment, he said bluntly, "We were betting on you."

"How do you mean?"

"When we saw the detective watching you – "

"Yes ..."

"Our money went on you ... that she was wrong ... You let us down, that's all; we were wrong. We lose."

"Oh," she said, startled. As Webster came closer, she swung her head in wild resentment at him. Again they were both staring at her, watching her. She looked around the street at the faces of passing people as if everybody had suddenly stopped to watch her and make a little bet. "A buck she will, a buck she won't, eh!" she said as her eyes brightened with a crazy fury. "Get out of my way," she whispered. Swinging her foot she kicked him savagely on the shin.

As he felt the pain he could think only of how she had asked, "Why did you do it?" and waited breathlessly for some gesture from him. At that moment there did not seem to be a single good instinct, a single good thing in his life that he had not betrayed.

And she came walking right at him as if she would walk right through him if he did not step aside, and she had her head up and her fists clenched tight, going down the street, going deeper into the crowd with the sun touching her red hat and her good legs with the runs down her stockings.

Responding

1. Why is Jack Malone so disappointed when the girl turns out to be a thief? What motivates him to go down the aisle and rescue her?
2. Explain what you think is going through the girl's mind as she waits for Jack to answer her question about why he rescued her. How does she react to Jack's answer? Why?
3. What are Jack's feelings after the girl kicks him in the shin? Explain why he felt that "there did not seem to be a single good instinct, a single good thing in his life that he had not betrayed."
4. How much do we learn about the thoughts and feelings of each character in the story? Why do you think the author chose to write the story this way?
5. Continue the story, adding a dialogue that takes place as Jack chases after and stops the girl. What would he say? How would she likely answer?