

PANHANDLING

By *Orin Fred Sweet*



If you are going to make a success of begging, my advice is to target the idea of sitting on a corner with a hand organ or building up against a building with a bunch of lead pencils in your hand. This is the thing to do: Pick out your man as he comes down the street and slide up to him with a note something like this: "Say, pal, could you slip a guy a nickel for a cup of coffee?" In a word, the most efficient form of begging is "panhandling." It means going out after the business.

And listen, you fellows who are forever being "panhandled": it's one of the best compliments that could be paid you. Your face has been studied before the "bunch" was made, not secured. How do I know? Let me tell you. I put in a little day at all around begging recently as any genuine "down-and-outer" could take the blame for. For one whole day I went around Chicago in a suit of clothes that had been made perhaps ten years back for a man at least fifty pounds heavier than myself; my shoes had been worn all one summer by a fellow in the plastering business, and I hadn't shined for five days. My entrance into a West Madison street barbershop excited not the least ripple of interest: I was too much a part of the accustomed atmosphere.

My day's begging brought me in 20 cents. It came in in bits, and each nickel came from the same kind of a man. Every cent of it came from panhandling. Folk didn't care for my hand organ music—I didn't blame them, nor did they care for my pencils, but they did listen to my personal appeal. And even when they didn't "come across" with a "Heave," they usually were polite and apologetic. No one would me for not going to work, or told me that my downfall was due to bad habits. The worst I got was a cold, firm fixing of the mouth and hand-to-hand connection.

The saloon came and tapped on the window. When I tried my luck further up the street two Italians came along and one of them beat over me with a paternal something about "Americans" hitting in on somebody else's trade.

Dispensing of the "blind" sign and stoned organs, I sat down against the side of a building and tried to pretend that a building and tried to pretend that I had lost one of my arms. I might as well have expected a piece of money from the cold brick wall back of me as from the passing throng, although I am sure my hat was tilted the true professional angle. Good-night! Me for more strenuous methods.

In the Haunts of "Down and Out."

I learned considerable about the more strenuous methods. As I said before, my appearance made me one of the herd. If I could not take part in any of the weird repertoire, I was at least permitted to stand by without acting as a check to any of it.

"Now, just as soon's it's warm enough we'll heat it out of the town side by each," outlined a tall, long necked, straggly gray mustache individual as he poured a glass until it was brimming over with cheap whiskey. "We're jake from now on," agreed the short, narrow eyed fellow beside him at the bar.

No sooner had the tall one gulped his whiskey than his bloodred eyes took on a new flash. "And before we blow town," he began to boast, "I'm going to 'crank' die bartender out of street. You know not he said to me 'he's night-me, wet boys as often as any he'd give'."

The smaller man looked up dispassionately. "Yes, and don't you'll do time. Some of that stuff. Forget it!"

A shaking, toothless devilish loved toward me and then burst into a sob story of how he used to be a foreman in a shop in St. Louis. A bewildered bartender looked out of his way until he almost wore a poisonous lamb-rick who was sprawled out asleep across the top of a row of barrels. Two boys, still under 20, but with the tramp look even in their yet well-fed faces, rolled cigars and half quarreled with each other.

Here and there a man radiated a razor-edged note or tried to straggle the broken beam of his hat.

And aside from the hundred or so human beings, all looking more or less alike, who stood at the dirty tables and hung along the grimy wall and occasionally spent money for booze, I recall the picture that was against the mirror back of the bar—a "Happy New Year" present, a scene of the country in summer of a brook and flow inside it and a calendar bearing the picture of George Washington. The bartender, I might add, wore clean lines.

There was a hole in the side of the wall where soap and rags were hung through if you bought beer. It was getting toward noon and I heard an old timer beside me remark, "I've got out and 'make' three 'straps'." He passed in a very matter-of-fact manner as he said it, and I followed him out. It was



THIS MAN SLIPPED ME THE FIRST NICKEL. THE OTHER THREE WHO CAME ACROSS LOOKED A GOOD DEAL LIKE HIM.



BY PARADOXICAL ACCIDENT I SAT DOWN IN FRONT OF AN 'EASY SAILING' SIGN. I COULDN'T COLLECT A CENT ON MY MUSIC.

No One Cared for the Music.

There are several reasons why hand organ begging has its drawbacks. In the first place it is hard to get hold of a hand organ in Chicago. The art seems to be passed. Finally I got a try through one of the big music houses that an Italian over at Harrison and Jefferson streets might have one of the instruments. Peter del Principe had one, I found, and he promised to loan it to me. But when I went back the next day, dressed for the job, there was nothing doing. He merely shook his head and muttered. It took a \$20 deposit to get hold of the battered affair. Afterward, when I asked Stinson del Principe to explain, he grunted, "No like da ole!"

I located in front of a saloon on the west side with a "please help the blind" sign pinned to my coat and placed my hat on the wheezy organ to catch the flow of gold. I took out of the corner of one eye, I could see that I wasn't "making good" at all. It seemed as easy for the postillions—men, women, and children, old and young—to pass me by. Every third note on the organ was flat, and the tune was of the "Don't Turn Away, Madge, I am Still Your Friend" variety. Just about when the thing was repeating the chorus for the fifth time the owner of

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Discovers Kind Who "Come Across."

"Say, pal, could you slip a guy a nickel for a cup of coffee?"

It came a little hard at first, like speaking a piece in school or asking the loan for a raise. The first man I picked turned me down, too.

"Sorry," he apologized, "but I'm hard up myself."

He seemed afraid of me and relented when he was safely on his way.

The next man was a fat, colored farmer, worried about catching the train. He had not been in the city long enough to get used to my kind, and he seemed bewildered as to what it was all about. I don't believe I took his thoughts for a minute off the "100" which you could see he owned somewhere. A quick and open soldier appeared, and when he shook his head I followed him for several paces. When I added a few more cents to my pile he turned with a serene laugh.

"Why, I don't get any money," he explained in disgust.

I tried a gray haired practical business man wearing glasses, a clerk in a late style derby hat, who looked as though he made about \$12 a week, and a fellow whose mouth was set in a thin, straight, hard line. The business man seemed irritated, the clerk said he was broke himself, and the man with the thin mouth set it a bit harder.

And then there came a fairly well dressed, competent looking man, who, I should say, was between 20 and 40 years of age. There was something about the expression of his face and the way he walked along that made you feel that although he had seen much of life the heart in him was still boyish. He saw me stare at a piano what I wanted, and reached in his pocket almost cheerfully. I think I could have had the 50 cent piece he drew out along with the nickel if I had pleaded a bit. Never did a nickel look to me quite as the one that man handed me. It seemed unusually bright, unusually powerful, unusually precious.

And with the securing of that nickel I learned something. It caused me to change my system. What was the use in waiting time and energy in "hitting" every human being that came along? Why not specialize? Why not approach only the competent looking men who looked as if they had seen much of life and still had a heart in them that was unwhitened?

Meets Friend of Better Days.

Fifteen minutes of begging nickels on a busy street had given me an unusual payback. I hunted and waited and watched for men who looked like the man who gave me the first nickel. It may have been a mere accident, but my judgment in no instance failed me, and I got another nickel near Madison and La Salle streets and two more in Michigan avenue. Many times I tested my judgment and received either an apology or the stammering mouth and the hunched footsteps. I will say this, though that in nearly every instance when I asked a man to give me a nickel I saw a wave of emotion pass over his face. At times I felt the expression to be one of pity that any man should fall so low as I apparently had fallen; frequently it seemed that his mind was filled with debate as to just what to do, and then again I believe he was entertaining a vision of himself in a similar plight.

It was over in Michigan avenue that I met a friend of better days. As he passed me he gave me the "once over" and would have gone on, but I stopped abruptly and he came over to where I was, inquiringly. In the instant or two that I waited for him to speak to me, I read his thoughts. They were troubled thoughts—not through any worry about me, but because he had had the misfortune to run into me.

"I wasn't sure it was you," he apologized. "I guess it is about three weeks since I saw you last," I mumbled. "I didn't know whether you were going to stop and speak or not."

"It's too bad," he stammered nervously, looking me all over.

I could see how anxious he was to be on his way without giving up any of his loose change.

"So long," I concluded dejectedly.

"So long," he answered, relieved, as he hurried on with the crowd.

What Became of the Nickel.

I was getting to be quite an old hand at the game when I met the youth from a little town in Indiana. I don't know just why I approached him. I knew better by that time. Up against it though he apparently was, his smooth, dark face had a small town look about it and in his black eyes there was an expression of fear caused by the big, tanning building, and the mocking smile, and so many people whom he had never seen before. His lips curled as though he were writhing from having slept in them, but he was no barrel house product—as yet.

"Say, pal, could you slip a guy a nickel for a cup of coffee?" It was out, almost through force of habit.

He stopped, half frightened, his lips quivered, and he looked me over.

"I wish I did have one," he choked, marveling that some one had at last spoken to him. "I just got out of jail down in Illinois. In fact, last week, I—they put me in when I hadn't done anything, either. They—"

But I completely applied my chances of hearing any more of his story, partly startled out before he was aware, but he became suspicious and started away as if I had given him a shove. I slipped him those four unusually bright nickels I had had one and "panhandled" my self.

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SORRY, BUT HE WAS BROKE HIMSELF.

THE CHICAGO SUNDAY TRIBUNE.