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FLAG DAY

What I have learnt as a street seller

What bliss! — I can at last put up my weary legs and relax! The long hours of standing about in the street, selling my wares, seem to have been ages ago. Forgotten are snubs, rudeness, cheek and stinginess, the aching arm and the cold wind blowing down my back. I relish the comfort and cosiness of my home and bask in a feeling of achievement and satisfaction. My thoughts wander back to the day's events, but now I only remember generosity, kindness, interest, the happy smile on the face of a child and the charming compliment which so much shortened the following half-hour.

During the many years I have collected on various nation-wide flag days I have gathered a store of experiences. I flatter myself that I have acquired something like a perfect technique of salesmanship. For one thing, I invariably pick the less noisy street in preference to the buzzing corner: the dodgers can't escape so easily that way! As a collector I have certain principles. I approach every prospective "customer" individually and I never rattle my tin. I try to keep a friendly smile even at the worst rebuffs, though I must confess that I stick to a certain scale of "thank yous". The old age pensioner or the woman with her three children get a much heartier acknowledgment of their pennies than does the lady smothered in furs and jewels who steps out of an elegant car and gives me sixpence. Needless to say, the same coin from her chauffeur calls for considerably warmer thanks.

I have learnt a lot on collection days. I have come to the conclusion that kindness of heart by no means always goes with immaculate grooming, that couturier clothes and sparkling gems do not necessarily correspond to generosity. I have discovered that the teddy boy often commands better manners than the young man about town with the exclusive Old School Tie.

I am not sure why men on the whole are more open-handed than women. Is it because their pocket money is more liberal than the women's housekeeping allowance or is it merely because I am a woman? On the whole, children, the old and the middle-aged are more inclined to give generously than is youth. Somewhere between adolescence and the forties, people seem to undergo a change. The children generally still part warm-heartedly with often a goodish slice of their pocket money. What a difference between the eight-year-old who offers her threepenny-bit with a shiny face and grubby fingers, and the well-paid typist girl dressed in the latest shade of "glamorous pink" (with lipstick and earclips to match) who condescendingly drops her coppers from delicately lacquered fingertips into my tin. The expression on her face I'd rather not remember! I hope that the school of life will not treat her too harshly before she learns generosity. And what about the well-groomed businessman in a Savile Row suit who gives me sixpence? Perhaps he would never have been able to afford his Super-Snipe if he had been more open-handed all his life — who knows!

On the other hand I meet the well-bred gentleman of the type who notices nobody and nothing, but, when approached, responds most generously and with perfect courtesy — he can't refuse a lady! I have also come

across another kind — mostly women — who don't notice me, but unlike the gentlemen they carry their unawareness to the bitter end, and, when addressed, look through me, ignore me, pass me and not as bat an eyelid.

Some people insist on practically telling me their family history and others inform me frankly and in no uncertain — often unprintable — terms that these collections should not be allowed in a welfare state. "I couldn't agree with you more, Sir, but we still need the money". My answer usually takes them aback and we part on friendly terms, my tin the heavier for their contribution. Of course, sometimes I meet people who treat me as if I were doing the job to fill my own purse or were highly paid for doing it. Such "customers" can be rude and insulting, but I have learnt not to argue; I pocket my pride, shrug my shoulders and soon I am cheered up by some dear old lady who can obviously barely afford half a crown, but who gives it shyly, almost apologetically: "I have grandchildren of my own, you know, and I should not like anything to happen to *them*."

Foreigners vary in their response. On the whole, as soon as they have got over their surprise and have understood the meaning of the cause they can be most generous. A similar response I get from coloured people. Of course, I have come across the globe-trotter in his Jaeger camel-hair coat, who, arriving at a hotel from an airtrip costing hundreds of pounds, carefully picked out 2½d. from a handful of silver. He did not even have the excuse of not understanding, for his language bore the stamp of English varsity education. The Commissionnaire, by the way, received a two-shilling piece a couple of minutes later.

Another man whose apology for not having any change was genuine, offered to give me some postage stamps instead. But I have a hunch that he gave a handsome contribution to another collector later in the day. Once, two girls who had only a few pence each and promised to add some more later actually stopped their car two hours afterwards when they recognised me half a mile away from our original meeting place. In fact they practically caused a traffic jam until they had caught my attention.

Talking of change, on one occasion I had been told so often that people had no change that involuntarily I asked the next "customer" instead of "Would you like a polioflag?" "Would you like a change?" What must he have thought of me!

An interesting feature are the couples. They fall into three distinct categories. The first consists of the obviously married ones who usually both refuse or both contribute. Next comes the elderly man who takes his woman friend out to lunch and wants to impress her by a grand gesture. The worst of the three groups are the young couples where the man calmly lets the girl pay not only for herself but for him as well. How she can go out with him a second time I don't know.

I usually have my lunch very early so that I am back on the beat when businessmen come out from clubs and restaurants, mellow with food and drink and inclined to be generous. For the sake of their money I must accept an occasional ambiguous compliment or an unwelcome pat on the arm. After all, it is for a good cause!