

## The Bum, The Cop, And The Church Anthem

By O. Henry

“Why do they call you “Soapy?” One bum asked the other.

“Because I was the only guy in jail who took a shower every day,” Soapy answered.

The bum persisted. “Why take a shower every day? What’s the point?”

“No reason. Just a habit. That’s just why they call me Soapy.”

“Well, stay clean,” the bum said. “Me -- I’d rather be warm than clean. I’m headin’ south for the winter. New York is too damn cold in the winter for us homeless guys. . . I got a sister down there in Florida who just got divorced. I oughtta be good for three months before she kicks me out; and by then, winter’ll be pretty well over.”

With a sharp smile and a quick wink, the tramp turned and shuffled away from Soapy and his park bench. Seated on this bench in Madison Square, deep within the concrete canyons of New York City, Soapy moved uneasily. And when Soapy moves uneasily on his bench in the park, you know that winter is near at hand.

A dead leaf fell onto Soapy’s lap. That was winter’s calling card. Winter is beautifully snowy to the regular people of Madison Square, and the inhabitants of that wintry city of New York love to prepare for winter with warm fires and thick coats. But since the homeless have neither of these luxuries, they have to prepare carefully.

Accordingly, Soapy's mind became aware of the fact that the time had come for him to provide for himself against the coming winter. And therefore he moved uneasily on his bench. He gazed out to the middle of the East River to a well fenced island. This small body of land was the location of the New York City Correctional Facility -- also known as Jail. It was located on an island in the middle of the river to assure the safety of the citizens of New York against all but the greatest of jailbird swim champions. It was sometimes called the “The Lockup,” and it was sometimes more affectionately called “The Island.” Those who knew it best referred to it as “The Isle,” as if it were the resting place of mythical heroes.

Soapy was one such man -- a man who loved the Isle for its many comforts. The winter hopes of Soapy were not of the highest sort. In them there were no thoughts of Mediterranean cruises. No vacations to Florida. No California getaways. Three months in County Jail was what his soul craved. Three months of assured board and bed and company, safe from cops and cold. It seemed to Soapy the essence of things desirable.

For years, this hospitable jail -- this magical island -- had been his winter home. Just as his

more fortunate fellow New Yorkers had bought their tickets to Miami Beach and the French Riviera each winter, so Soapy had made his arrangements for an annual trip to his island jail. And now the time had come. On the previous night sleeping in the park, three newspapers, packed beneath his coat, around his ankles and over his lap, had failed to hold off the cold as he slept on his bench near the fountain in the ancient square. So the warm jail loomed big and timely in Soapy's mind.

Now don't get the wrong impression: New York takes care of its homeless population. There was an endless round of institutions on which he might set out and receive lodging and food. But to a man of Soapy's proud spirit, the gifts of charity are a pain. You must pay in humiliation of spirit for every benefit received at the hands of do-gooders. Every bed of charity must be paid for with a boring prayer session. Every loaf of bread comes with a price tag: charity-givers try to make you a productive citizen. Soapy hated these things. In Soapy's opinion, the jailers were friendlier than the do-gooders. "It is better to be a guest of the law," he once told a friend, "which, though conducted by rules, does not meddle unduly with a gentleman's private affairs."

But how does one get into jail? Soapy, having decided to go to the Island, at once set about accomplishing his desire. There were many easy ways of doing this. The pleasantest was to dine at some expensive restaurant; and then, after declaring poverty, be handed over quietly to a policeman. An accommodating judge would do the rest: off to jail -- and with it the warmth of the cell.

Soapy left his bench and strolled out of the square and across the level sea of asphalt, where Broadway and Fifth Avenue flow together. He walked up Broadway and halted at a glittering cafe, where are gathered together nightly the finest people of New York enjoy life. It was time to eat, and theirs was the finest food. As to attire, Soapy had confidence in himself from the lowest button of his vest upward. He was shaven, his coat was decent; only his black pants looked unacceptable. If he could reach a table in the restaurant, the portion of him that would show above the table would raise no doubt in the waiter's mind, and success would be his. A medium rare steak, thought Soapy, would be just the thing to order -- with a bottle of red wine, and then a cup of coffee, and a cigar. No. No cigar -- not in this fine and delicate society. But the rest would be welcome. The total bill for the meal would not be so high as to call forth any physical revenge from the café's management, but it would get him arrested. And the meat would leave him filled and happy for the bumpy journey to his winter refuge in the county jail.

But as Soapy set foot inside the restaurant door, the head waiter's eye fell upon his frayed trousers and old shoes. Strong and ready hands turned him around and conveyed him in silence and haste to the sidewalk. There would be no steak tonight.

Soapy turned off Broadway. It seemed that his route to The Island was not to be an easy one. Some other way of entering paradise must be thought of.

At a corner of Sixth Avenue, neon lights and electronic products behind plate-glass made a shop window conspicuous. Soapy took a rock and smashed it through the glass. People came running around the corner, a policeman in the lead. Soapy stood still, with his hands in his

pockets, and smiled at the sight of brass buttons on the police officer.

"Where's the man that done that?" asked the officer excitedly.

"Don't you figure out that I might have had something to do with it?" said Soapy, sarcastically -- but friendly.

The cop didn't get it. His mind refused to accept Soapy even as a clue. Men who smash windows do not remain to talk sarcastically with the police. They run. The policeman saw a man half way down the block running to catch a taxi. With drawn club, he joined in the pursuit. Soapy, with disgust in his heart, limped away, twice unsuccessful now.

On the opposite side of the street was a restaurant of no great quality. It served people with large appetites and small wallets. Its plates and bowls were plastic; its meat and soup were thin. Into this place Soapy took his old and ragged trousers without challenge. He sat at a table and consumed hamburgers, pancakes, doughnuts, and pie. And then he told the waiter he had no money to pay. "Now, get busy and call a cop," said Soapy. "And don't keep a gentleman waiting."

"I wouldn't waste a cop on you," said the waiter, with a voice like a diesel engine. "Hey, guys," he called to several of the larger waiters, "let's teach this loser how to fly."

The two waiters pitched Soapy neatly upon his left ear onto the hard pavement. He arose, joint by joint, and beat the dust from his clothes. Arrest seemed but a rosy dream. The Island seemed very far away. A policeman who stood in front of a drug store two doors away laughed and walked away down the street.

Soapy traveled five blocks before his courage permitted him to try capture again. This time the opportunity presented what he stupidly said to himself was "a cinch." A good looking but modest young woman was standing before a store display window gazing with girlish interest at its display of fashions, and two yards from the window a large policeman leaned against a water plug.

Soapy's idea now was to assume the role of the hateful male "pig" whose "sexual harassment" makes life intolerable for young women. The refined and elegant appearance of his victim and the nearness of the conscientious cop encouraged him to believe that he would soon feel the pleasant official clutch upon his arm that would insure his winter quarters on the tight little island of warm convicts.

Soapy straightened himself, pulled open his shirt, and swaggered toward the young woman. He made eyes at her. He smiled. He smirked. He made obscene gestures. He went through the all the motions of the "player." With half an eye, Soapy saw that the policeman was watching him fixedly. The young woman moved away a few steps, and again bestowed her attention upon store window.

Soapy followed, boldly stepping to her side, raised his hat and said, "Hey there, little girl!"

Don't you want to come and play in my yard?"

"What?" she asked.

The policeman was still looking. The harassed young woman had only to wave to the cop and Soapy would be practically inside his island heaven. Already he imagined he could feel the cozy warmth of the station-house.

And then the young woman faced him and, stretching out a hand, caught Soapy's coat sleeve. Sure, fella," she said happily, "if you've got the money, I've got the time. I would've spoke to you sooner, but the cop was watchin'."

With the young woman clinging to what she thought was the arm of a customer, Soapy trudged past the policeman overcome with gloom. He seemed doomed to liberty.

At the next corner, he shook off his female companion and ran. He didn't slow down until he reached the theater district. Women in furs and men in thousand dollar suits moved happily in the wintry air. A sudden fear seized Soapy that some dreadful enchantment had rendered him immune to arrest. The thought brought a little of panic upon him, and when he came upon another policeman lounging grandly in front of a splendid theater, he grabbed at a sudden and desperate action.

"Disorderly conduct, he mumbled to himself." Right there on the sidewalk, Soapy began to yell drunken gibberish at the top of his harsh voice. He danced, howled, raved and otherwise disturbed the peace.

The policeman twirled his club, turned his back to Soapy and remarked to a citizen. "It's one of them Yale University lads celebratin' the weekend. College kids! They're noisy; but no harm in 'em. What I'd do to be young again!"

All hope lost, Soapy ceased his racket. Would a policeman *ever* lay hands on him? In his imagination, the Island seemed an unattainable dream. He buttoned his thin coat against the chilling wind.

In a cigar store he saw a well-dressed man lighting a cigar at a swinging light. He had set his umbrella by the door on entering. Soapy stepped inside, grabbed the umbrella and sauntered off with it slowly. The man at the cigar light followed hastily.

"My umbrella," he said, sternly.

"Oh, is it?" sneered Soapy, adding insult to injury. "Well, why don't you call a police-man? I took it. Your umbrella! Why don't you call a cop? There's one, standin' there on the corner."

The umbrella owner slowed his steps. Soapy did likewise, with a thought that luck would again run against him. The policeman looked at the two curiously.

"Of course," said the umbrella man--"that is--well, you know how these mistakes occur--I--if it's your umbrella, I hope you'll excuse me--I picked it up this morning in a restaurant--If you recognize it as yours, why --I hope you'll--

Then the man blurted out crazily: ***I tell you I didn't mean to steal it! It was a mistake! I was desperate! I thought it would rain! For God's sake, don't call a cop!"***

"Of course it's mine," said Soapy, angrily. "And I can't win!", he said to himself.

The ex-umbrella man retreated. The policeman hurried to assist a tall blonde in an opera cloak across the street in front of a street car that was approaching two blocks away. Soapy walked eastward through a street damaged by construction. He hurled the umbrella angrily into an construction ditch. He muttered against the blue men who wear helmets and carry clubs. Because he wanted to fall into their clutches, they seemed to regard him as a king who could do no wrong.

"How can I get in from the cold?" the desperate bum asked the cold sky above.

He walked. He dragged. Then finally Soapy reached one of the avenues to the east where the glitter and turmoil of downtown was faint. He set his face down this street toward Madison Square, for the homing instinct survives even when the home is a park bench. But on an unusually quiet corner Soapy came to a standstill. Here was an old church, quaint and rambling, with a high steeple. Through one violet-stained window a soft light glowed, where, no doubt, the organist leaned over the keys, making sure of his mastery of the coming Sunday hymns. There drifted out to Soapy's ears sweet music that caught and held his body and soul against the iron fence. It was church music -- an anthem to God.

The moon was above, lustrous and serene; vehicles and pedestrians were few; sparrows twittered sleepily in the trees -- for a little while the scene might have been a country churchyard far from New York. And the church music that the organist played cemented Soapy to the iron fence, for he had known it well in the days when his life was respectable -- and contained such things as mothers and roses and jobs and ambitions and friends and clean thoughts and clean collars.

"Those were the days when my life meant something."

This holy anthem from heaven went into Soapy's soul. The combination of Soapy's state of mind, the influences of the old church, and the holiness of the anthem brought a sudden and wonderful change in his soul. He viewed with swift horror the pit into which he had tumbled, the degraded days, unworthy desires, and the dead hopes that made up his homeless existence.

And also in a moment his heart responded thrillingly to this new mood. An instantaneous and strong impulse moved him to battle with his desperate fate. He would pull himself out of the mud; he would make a man of himself again; he would conquer the evil that had taken possession of him. There was time; he was comparatively young yet; he would resurrect his old eager ambitions and pursue them without faltering. Those solemn but sweet organ notes had set up a revolution in him. Tomorrow he would go into the roaring downtown district and find work.

A fur importer had once offered him a job as a driver. He would find him tomorrow and ask for the position. A job! A life! What a thought! He would *be* somebody in the world. He would--

Soapy felt a hand laid on his arm. He looked quickly around into the broad face of a policeman. "What are you doin' here?" asked the officer.

"Nothin'," said Soapy.

"Then come along," said the policeman. "We don't allow no loiterin' here around God's house."

Soapy spent the evening in a city jail cell, pondering his fate.

"Loitering violates Section 3157a of the New York Criminal Code. Third offense. I sentence you to three months on the Prison Island," said the judge in the Police Court the next morning.

"Thank you God!" said Soapy with upturned eyes toward heaven. "I'm free at last!" And Soapy thanked his creator as they took him out of the cold December air and away to jail.

**THE END**