

THE ART OF BUMMING A MEAL

BY HENRI TASCHERAUD

FOR the first time, I was thoroughly on the bum. That is to say, I was traveling nowhere in particular, without a penny in my pocket, and without the means (barring work) of getting one. At that period I was nineteen; at that moment I was forty-eight hours hungry.

In Ogden, Utah, I nearly missed the manifest freight for Laramie, Wyoming, because the yeasty-sweet smell from a bake-shop kept me fascinated for several minutes on my way to the yards. In the box-car, during the night, the odor of wheat that lingered in the wood tantalized me and made me sleepless. At Laramie I was already faint when a railway bull forced me, with a dozen other tramps who had arrived by the same train, into an empty for Cheyenne.

This was in the small dark hours, and at Cheyenne a cool, fresh morning greeted me with the keen scent of sage-brush. I was weak from hunger in an air that gives a man an appetite ten minutes after breakfast. I knew not even the rudiments of the art I must practice before I won my breakfast. None of the other tramps in the car had any money. None, moreover, seemed to mind. In particular, the one who sat beside me seemed free from every care. He had amused us on the way with a performance which I later practiced for months, with indifferent success. He was a man of thirty, with a touch of gray in his hair. His natural expression was one of mildly shrewd indolence. He would be looking at you, and suddenly his eyes would widen slightly, his lips fall loose—and he had become an innocent youth of twenty, with the bewildered look of a healthy young

half-wit. Another swift movement: his brow wrinkled, his eyes contracted, his mouth drooped at the corners, his shoulders wilted—and he was a broken-down man of fifty.

The gang dispersed in the yards. As I walked toward the town my performing neighbor fell into step with me.

"Let's go feed our faces," he said.

"You got money?" I asked.

He looked at me with a pitying smile.

"No, but I damn soon will," he answered. "Come on, I'll show you how."

We passed several bakeries, and I was sorely tempted to go in and beg a loaf of bread. I had heard of such things being done. But my companion was evidently above anything so crude. When we reached the main street, we stopped on the corner. We surveyed the row of citizens standing along the curb. There were possibly ten men. From my leaning-post by a cigar store I picked out what seemed to me the likeliest face. It had good-humored blue eyes and red cheeks, and belonged to a broad, genial Irishman with clothes baggy and a trifle too big for a good business man. The others seemed hopeless. From a beanery two doors down issued rich, good smells.

My companion stepped up to make his touch. If I had been picking the tightest, sourest subject of the lot, it would have been the one he chose to address. He was a small, lean man, thin-nosed and thin-lipped, with nervous black eyes under blond eyebrows. His nostrils had a cabbage-leaf flare. His clothes fitted him, and had been pressed within the week. I suspected him of being a dyspeptic, and of sucking peppermints.

Before this unpromising runt stood my friend. He appeared to be demanding, with dignity, politely but vigorously. The little man looked up with annoyance. He scowled. He was still scowling when I saw him reach into his pocket. When his hand touched the confidently ready hand of my friend, I heard the clink of *more than one* coin!

My friend waved condescendingly and turned to join me. His face was bright with a malicious grin. In his hand were two silver dollars.

We passed by the beanery that five minutes before had seemed a sort of heaven, and entered a rather pretentious restaurant.

"Ham and scramble four and rush the jamocha! Bring some ketchup and the pepper sauce!" barked my friend. Then I asked, "How in hell did you do it?"

"I just walked up," he replied, "and told him I could see he wasn't the kind of a guy who was careless with coin, but I told him I needed four bits to get a meal. How about it? First I thought he'd turn me down cold. Must have got his goat, I guess. Anyway, I figured bums wouldn't hit him up much because of his mug, see? And the old bat shined a couple of cart wheels!"

"I had the big Irishman figured for the best bet," I ventured.

"Yeh," drawled my mentor. "Lots of guys would. You'd have got two bits out of him, maybe. Old pickle-face was a long shot, but I knew if he came across it would be something like."

We got up from the table and were approaching the cashier's desk.

"Listen," he said. "If I'd hit up big Irish, you know what I'd have done? Look!"

Before the eyes of the cashier he gave the amazing performance of the box-car. He seemed to shrink, and suddenly he was a bleary-eyed old man. The cashier stared, rooted to his stool. He didn't realize until we were out and up the street that we had not paid the check.

"Where you going, kid?" asked my friend.

I told him I was bound for Chicago.

"Well, I got a date in Denver tomorrow," he said. "There's a way-freight going out in a couple of hours. Guess I'll mosey down to the yards. You take the fruit special 'round seven, if you can make her. If you don't catch her, there's a manifest out of here about midnight. You better take this couple of bucks. So long, kid."

And he disappeared around the corner.

II

That was my first lesson in the art of bumming a meal. The page was taken from an advanced course, but I was lucky to realize so early that there was an advanced course. I have since learned a great deal more. I don't see why any smart fellow need ever work unless he likes it. The elaborate confidence games for big stakes that I have seen bright men and women pull sound like work to me. I prefer getting ready for my meals no earlier than meal-time. In the art of bumming a meal, ease and simplicity are the cardinal virtues.

At the very start I want to blow up the widespread notion that the American farmer is a generous and hospitable fellow. So far as my experience goes, if there is a stingier person than the American farmer, it is only his wife. I have bummed in every State in the Union, and my pleasant recollections of farmers are scarcely worth mentioning. Canada and the north-western States, like Minnesota and the Dakotas, are perhaps not quite so bad as the rest of the country. But by now I make it a point to stick to the towns, if only because farms are so far apart that if you're turned down in the first you have a long walk for the problematical chance of success in the next. If you have to go to a farmer, pick a Negro or a foreigner. And among foreigners, leave out the Chinamen and Japs at once. In town or country, the Oriental is a hopeless proposition—unless he runs a gambling house, and there are few enough of those. The European settler and the Negro are sporting chances. It flatters them to have

an American ask for food. But they are just as likely to grin their satisfaction and shoo you away hungry. There are no hearty pioneers left in this broad land. Southern country hospitality to tramps consists chiefly in sending out a reception committee of hounds trained for the purpose. The tramp's only redress is to raid the farmer's cornfield or vegetable garden, or to get up early enough to milk one of his cows.

Panhandling on the street of a city or town is the lowest form of the game, the easiest and the most tedious. Any tramp who can't bum a meal on the street deserves to work or starve. A few general rules will suffice. Never approach a Chinaman, Jap, Greek, Armenian or Jew. It's useless. It is wise also never to speak to a woman on the street, unless you look absolutely helpless. Polite words sound like insults, and straight talking is common assault at least. Leave prosperous-looking men alone unless you are very sure of yourself. Pick a laborer or a shabby-looking man, preferably young. Look for the man who is likely to be not too sure of his own security. I know a young fellow who gave a panhandler his last dime on a cold night in Chicago, thereby bracing his fast-waning belief that he belonged to the proud class that gives, and not to the class that receives. In this instance the panhandler was distinctly the benefactor.

Never whine or beg. The trick is to let your prospect feel that you belong to his class—that he might be embarrassed just as you are some day. The opening, as a salesman would say, is half the battle. Get a man's interest by asking him the way to a street. He'll stop without suspicion; you've got his ear, and when you make your request he'll come through more than half the time. Two, or at the most three touches are all a really competent bum needs on his way to the restaurant.

The man who engages in elaborate and protracted forms of beggary is no tramp, but as insane a professional as any merchant or banker. The sums to be made by

sitting still with a cup and a handful of pencils or shoelaces in any large city, particularly if one can simulate some physical defect, are fabulous. But what a job!

Back-door bumming is about on a level with panhandling, with the added disadvantage that it often brings no more than cold potatoes. If women are to be shunned on the street, they are to be sought at the back door. Pick a house with a well-kept back-yard. If the housewife gives you anything at such a house, it is likely to be good, since a woman who is careful of her flowers is likely to be a good cook as well. The houses near the railway yards and those in the outlying districts are generally the ones least frequented by other tramps. The lower middle-class is generally the best. The poor will frequently not dare refuse, to save their faces; but their fare is generally of a low order. My average is about one meal for ten back door calls—a pretty low average, but a method not to be despised in emergencies.

Here again it is the smile that wins. Don't bother to tell a long story unless the housewife shows she needs one in payment for her kindness. The bare cheerful assertion that you are hungry and don't start work until tomorrow morning is usually all that is required. I myself rather like a chance to tell a whopping story, seeing how well I can please my hostess and how far I can stretch my imagination. It is astonishing what a good-hearted woman will believe. Fat ones often like a chance to weep.

III

The restaurant racket is a good one to master. A little experience will enable you to spot the proprietor who will let you have a meal for nothing or on your promise of future payment—which comes to the same thing—if you declare yourself broke when you come in. The smaller the establishment, generally, the better your chances—provided you avoid the nationalities enumerated above. The trouble with small places is that the food is generally poor.

One can always call at the back door of a restaurant and offer to wash dishes in exchange for a meal. The chef will frequently lay out the meal for the asking. If he is stingy enough to point to the dish pile later on, you can always walk out.

The best form of the restaurant game, however, is to walk in like a bona-fide customer, order well, and then discover you have lost your pocket-book. Offer the cashier your hat, or your coat, but get as close to the door as possible first. Pick a crowded street, and a relatively expensive place. Two can work this trick better than one. It is wise to order liberally, with a cigar on the side. The manager is usually a poor psychologist, and he is more than likely to take the size of your order for evidence of good intentions. I cannot stress too much, however, the importance of a crowded street, and of getting close to the door. I wear a broken ear that will never match its mate for having neglected these simple precautions.

Few tramps in seaports realize the possibilities of beach-combing. There is scarcely a sea-cook afloat who will not feed a stranger for the asking. That is probably because he is asked so seldom. If the cook won't, ask the second cook. If he won't, ask the messboy. But don't go on board until the ship's meal is over—that is, at eight, one, and six. Ship's fare in port is usually excellent.

Prostitutes, as a class, are the most generous folk in the land, excepting, perhaps, actresses, who are, however, not so easy to find. In the case of the prostitutes, I suspect two reasons: they have not much sense of moral superiority—feeling superior, in fact, only to moral men and married women—and, being sentimental and superstitious, they like to atone for their sins by generosity so long as it does not interfere with business. Be that as it may, I have never been refused money, whiskey, or food by a prostitute who was not busy when I called. I once made the round of the cribs in a small Montana town, at a time when business was particularly bad,

and came away with eighteen dollars, much whiskey, and one meal—having room for no more than that. In dealing with a prostitute be straight-forward and good-humored, unless you have a tale of great misfortune to tell. Then be as melancholy as you please: they like to sympathize.

At the opposite pole in the matter of charity are Protestant clergymen. From the bum's point of view they are even worse than Chinamen and farmers, for they won't refuse help. Oh, no! They gravely waste your time and raise your hopes, and then firmly demand either security or labor—and if you are ready to offer either, why bother with a preacher? Catholic priests, on the other hand, are much more generous, particularly if you make them think you are a Catholic. The Salvation Army in large towns is a very efficient bureau of charity—keep away from it! In the small towns, however, it is simple-minded and generous, and gives what it has—poor fare, indeed.

A nunnery, or Catholic hospital, or any institution managed by sisters, is a promising field. The sisters in the kitchen may be shy, but all you need do is ask for the Mother Superior. I don't know why, but a request to see this personage seems binding upon all her charges, and all Mother Superiors I have dealt with have been good-hearted, if gloomy, women. Incidentally, the man who, being refused by a sister, calls for the Mother Superior practically cinches the job for the man who comes after him; and that is a suitable, and tramp-like thing to do.

I have never been refused a meal in the kitchen of an old men's home, and have never been given one in the kitchen of an orphanage. I have been fed by conductors and brakemen of freight-trains I rode. I have even eaten with the mayor of a small town in Colorado—but that was sheer bravado inspired by bad hootch: I walked into his office, sat on his desk, and told him he had a hell of a town, where an honest man couldn't get a job. He took

me out to lunch; but I wouldn't try that one again. I have eaten with sheep-herders in Montana, with cowboys in Wyoming, and with hill-billies in Kentucky. The food was generally rotten, and I was always glad to get back to the towns. But in all my travels I have never met so sure a source of food as tramps.

IV

Any tramp who has anything will split it with any other tramp. If you don't know how to find a tramp, just walk the streets or hang around the railway yards. If you look like a tramp, you'll soon be accosted by another with the salutation, "Where you from, and where you going?" That, or a similar greeting, is the universal password. Make your needs known, and he'll give you what he can. If he has nothing, ask him the way to the jungle.

The jungle is an area on the outskirts of every town, near the railway lines, which the tramp has marked out for his own. It is his base of supply, his hotel, and, above all, his chamber of commerce. The jungle may be the far end of a graveyard, or an abandoned factory or yard. If there is no roof in it, it is likely to be treed. It always has running water, for the real tramp shaves frequently and washes his clothes oftener than most laborers. He also carefully washes the tin cans which are the cooking utensils of the jungle before and after use. It is only the hobo, who is a laborer out of a job, who goes about unshaven, and leaves dirty cans behind him. You will generally find a few tramps camping in the jungle, and you will very frequently find non-perishable food cached away for the use of any brother who comes along. The police raided a deserted barn on the outskirts of Stockton, California, two years ago, and found in it enough canned goods, cured meats, and other food-stuff, all carefully wrapped up, to feed fifty men for a Winter. And of the thirty-odd tramps

who were camped there at the time, not more than a dozen had been there a week. All were transients.

If the jungle is close to the tracks, it usually has also a good coal pile and plenty of fire-wood. Many is the succulent meal I have cooked in a jungle, having arrived with empty hands and pockets. And there is no restaurant fare to equal a good meal cooked in the open in good weather.

In the jungle, too, you'll learn all the news a tramp needs to know. You will hear what parts of the country have been favored with prosperity, what railway divisions have friendly trainmen, what towns, and what houses in these towns, in all parts of the land, harbor kind souls who like to do good to wandering men. Here you will learn the local freight, express, and passenger time-tables, and here you will meet the passenger-stiff, that lonely, misanthropic maniac tramp product of the Twentieth Century who rides only the mail trains, and who, if he takes a fancy to you, will route you across the continent by a faster route than any agent could offer a passenger. If you are hungry in Butte, Montana, you'll learn in the jungle how to eat in Seattle next morning.

Many people believe that a man can't starve in an American community. They are wrong. Men have died of hunger within sight, almost, of food. I have seen men so close to starvation that they no longer had the energy to look for food. But they were men who had missed their calling. They should have got themselves jobs, or done something and got into jail.

The true tramp believes in himself as surely as a preacher believes in his hell and heaven, and a go-getter salesman in his goods. As you stand before your prospect, you say to him in effect: "I am; therefore I deserve to remain." If you don't believe that, neither will anybody else believe it. The man who doesn't must either work or starve.