



The State of Beggary

A Venerable Profession

Comes Into Its Own

By MILTON S. MAYER



PROSPERITY MAY BE JUST AROUND THE CORNER, BUT WHO IS GOING TO DESERT HIS DOWNY COUCH AND LOOK FOR IT? THEY SAY THE BEST PHYSICIANS RECOMMEND SLEEPING OUT-DOORS WHEN THE WEATHER IS FINE.

MCHOEHANDLE and I stood at the sloppy counter at Louie's, just making things worse by drinking a stein of what Louie puts out under the label, and libel, of beer. A few months ago a report went the rounds that beer was going to follow Middle West Utilities' lead and go down to 15 cents. It never did. McHoehandle can afford 25 cent beer. I cannot.

"Do you know," said McHoehandle, wiping the collar of foam from his lips with the back of his hand, "I am getting tired of this depression."

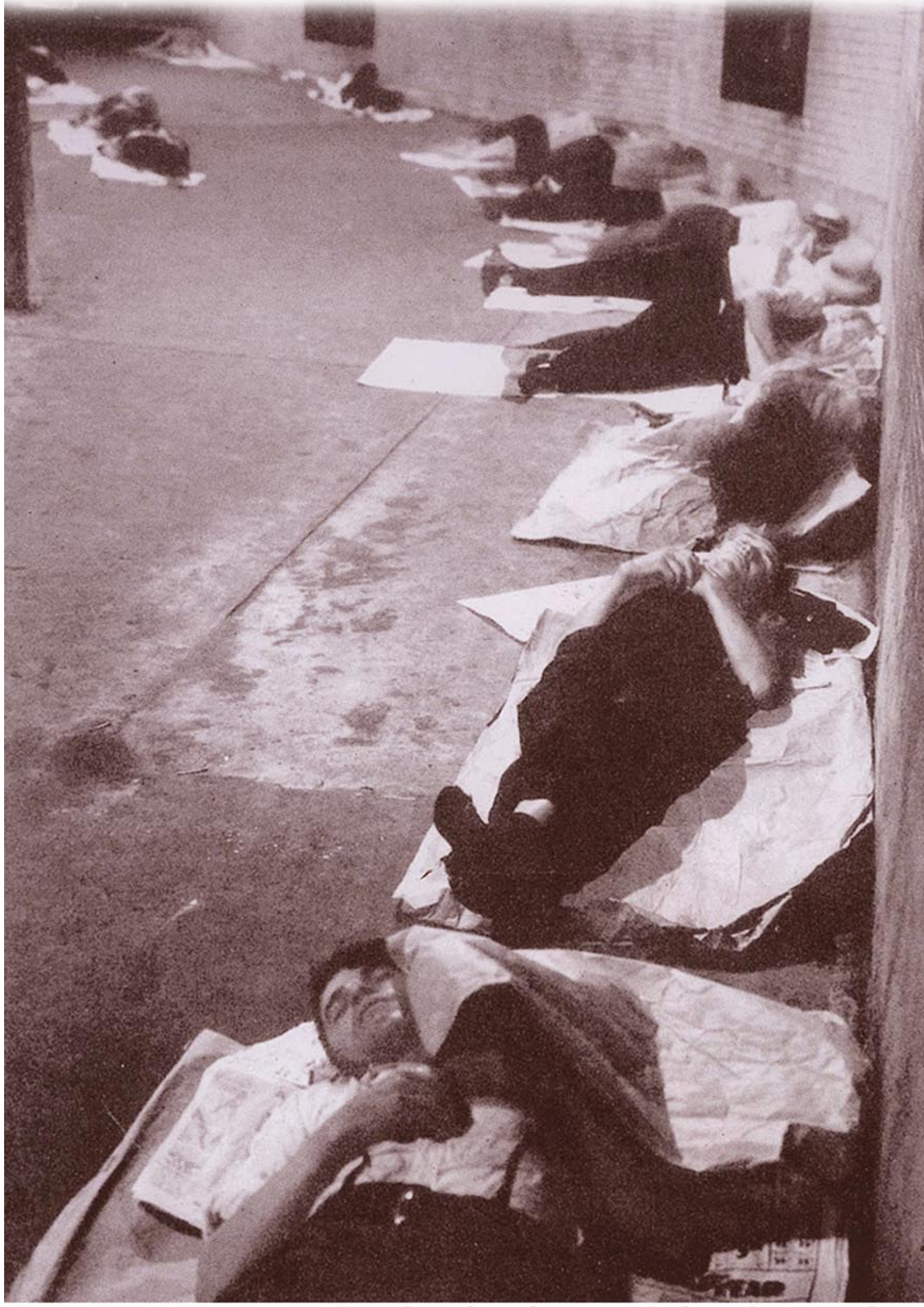
"What's the matter with it?" I asked. McHoehandle works for a university and hasn't had his salary cut.

"It depresses me," he said. "I don't like to think about people who haven't enough to eat. I have too much."

"How often do you think about people who haven't enough to eat?" I asked him.

"I didn't think about them very often, at first. I am very lightly endowed with human pity, and as long as they didn't stand in front of me and starve I didn't think about them. But now they're everywhere. They're on the boulevards and in the parks. They're on shady streets in nice neighborhoods and around the corner from expensive restaurants. You can tell they're starving by looking at them. Their nerve is gone—they don't even beg. You see a thousand every day. I tell you, it gives a man a turn. Let's have another beer."

But you can't drown the world's sorrows in Louie's galvanized beer. I doubt that anything exhilarates when you get into McHoehandle's mood. I've been in it for months. But I've been afraid to open my trap. It's like the plague that knocked Europe into a cocked hat about five hundred years ago. The best people sat around in their ruby-studded castles drinking out of gold goblets and keeping the shades pulled down so they wouldn't have to see what was going on beyond the moat. If you try to tell people what you've seen on west Madison street or under Wacker drive, they tell you to stow it—aren't they feeling terrible enough without having to think about that? Sure they are; so you stow it.



The sidewalks are unyielding, but they don't catch fire when you drop a lighted cigarette on them the way the beds in the Congress and the Blackstone do. A quiet evening at home for some of our less busy citizens.

I DON'T suppose talking about it, especially in this maudlin fashion, does any good. But nothing else seems to do any better. The people who still have a little money left have dumped millions into the relief chests. I suppose there has been a little graft, and a little waste—but not much. There are too many honest people keeping an eye on each other for anyone to make a man-sized haul. Where has it all gone?—and it has all gone. Into thin soup and thin stew, into more thin soup and more thin stew, into the bellies of the starving. When it's all gone, they're still starving, every last one of them. And when you think of that, you say to yourself, "What in the devil is going to happen?" But you don't know the answer to that, so you cut short your ponderations with, "Good God" or "It's terrible," and go on about your business, if you have any.

At least that was the way I faced the problem until about a year ago, when I was put back into circulation by one of the great, teetering corporations of this city. I had my choice of begging or writing. Begging, I knew, had always been the more profitable enterprise, in flush times anyway. But it meant a great deal of footwork and no less of hat-tipping, neither of which has ever been my especial forte. So I decided in favor of a life, while it lasted, of letters.

The position of such a person in the economic maelstrom is in many ways enviable. He does not have a steady income, which is decidedly disadvantageous, from the spiritual standpoint at least; and there is, or was, until recently, a certain embarrassment connected with the inability to provide a business address. On the credit side of being unemployed, however, there are plenty of items. It is, first, a sobering state for a young man who had always assumed, with all young men, that the world was his oyster. Moreover, happy is he bound to be who escapes the exasperating fate of the wage-slave, even if he escapes, perforce, by the back door. And finally, and most importantly, to the man who has lost his job there is thrown



The city's proud skyline looks down—not so benignly, perhaps—upon a horde of homeless Chicagoans. By day they count the shiny automobiles on Michigan Boulevard. By night they sleep, as one and the turf of Grant Park is as rose petals underneath them, even if the grass of Grant Park makes inferior eating.

back the curtain on golden vistas of perspective: he is able to appreciate the terrors as well as the discomforts of destitution, and to feel them, if only vicariously.

IT is no small solace to a man of my kidney to be able to chuck the frigid "No" of refusal for "I'm sorry, partner, but I'm out of work myself." The distaste for encountering beggars and having to refuse them has always been acute in me. I have tried various methods, such as ignoring them or crossing to the other side of the street, but no such device has ever given complete satisfaction. Several times a day, and the several grew by bounds as conditions went from worse to worse, I found myself face to face with the sad spectacle of a man whose eyes glittered with hunger and whose lips implored a nickel. The plain, peace-loving citizen who does not enjoy abusing these wraiths with the why-don't-you-go-to-the-proper-place type of sermon has no alternative: he has to say "No." And saying "No" twenty times a day not only tries a man's patience but tends, after a while, to take the sun out of the sky. The clinging, if erroneous, suspicion that each "No" deprives a life, however unworthy, of its last mote of hope does not add to the cheer of the evening meal.

This stony manner, so indigenous to success in finance, is particularly hard, it seems to me, for the green and tractable young man to assume. And I, although I am aging fast, am a green and tractable young man. I would be of no use behind a wicket. But I have an extremely nifty light grey suit, which a man in Selma, Ala., sold me three years ago by telling me that I looked like a million dollars in it. The lining looks like the flag Napoleon took at Austerlitz, and the edges of the sleeves and collar are somewhat rubbed down, but I will say that when I wear it, even now, I look like a millionaire. That this was no idle conceit I realized by checking the number of times I was approached for small coins when I wore the million dollar garment against the number of times I was approached when wearing my less imposing Richman Bros. creation of blue serge. The count was so distressing that I have, actually, abandoned the millionaire model altogether.

THERE are hoboes, of course, in this hobo capital of the world, and begging is a career with them, as gunning is with the Capones and banking with the Mor-



Grant Park

gans. You couldn't get them to do anything else. About half a million of the professionally tattered blow in and out of the city every year, with stopover privileges. Fifty thousand, I suppose, comprise the home guard, sauntering amiably up and down west Madison, north Clark, and south State streets; sojourning more or less regularly in the county brig, and earning their cigarette money by repeating at local elections. Like the Germany army in 1915, every time one of them falls another fills his place. In the old days it was a fair gamble that every bum who asked for a bit of change was simply pursuing his chosen vocation, and it did not take the measure of a man to spurn him.

Today we know that half the feet that shuffle wretchedly along the streets once wore shiny new shoes, at least on Sundays, or reposed under mahogany desks, or even on them.

They stand in the doorways and watch for a kind face—each snarl of refusal brings them a little nearer the nadir of their self-respect. They were not born to the purple of beggary. They wear glasses, so many of them, and it is an obvious truism that few denizens of the blind baggage ever have their eyes examined, the better to read Spinoza or Hegel. They straighten their spotted ties. They wash their shirts and handkerchiefs in the lake each morning. They wipe their wayworn shoes with newspapers, and they brush their dirty clothes with their dirty hands. They try to stop a prospective philanthropist without being seen by the passing crowds, and they do not look up, ever.

These men are no bums. Half the day they are trying to get work, knowing they can't, and half the day they are trying to get money, somehow, to keep them, and too often wives and children, alive. It is pretty sad. Who wants to hear their story, who, hurrying by, has the time or the patience? So it's just, in a shameful voice, "Can you help me out, mister?" and a worrying world doesn't differentiate, and the shame in the voice is unheard.

Young men, old women—young men and old women never begged in this country before. A man goes down Van Buren Street, thirty-five perhaps, with a woman carrying a baby—"Can you help me out, mister?" An old man with a roll of newspapers under his arm stands in front of a cafeteria on Wabash Avenue looking in the window, hard; the manager comes to the door and the old man moves on, stumbling. A boy of twenty-five, his cheap blue suit clean and frayed, falls down on Fifty-fifth street and doesn't move; they lift him up; he isn't drunk; he has no voice and his lips say, "Food"; he is carried to a restaurant; he drinks a bowl of soup in one gulp and falls asleep.

I SIT at home at my typewriter; the back door bell rings all day. Kids eight and ten have cookies. A fat, rheumatic old man has home-made horse-radish. A

B E G G A R Y

thin woman in black, thirty or thirty-five, has macaroons. All ages — both sexes — have baskets of sundries. A man plays the violin, very, very badly, in the street. A middle-aged man, with glasses and a white shirt, can repair anything. A little fellow with no chin and red eyes says, "Can you help me out, mister, or are you out of work yourself?" A man of fifty, with a horizontal forehead, looks like a killer, asks for a few pennies to help him buy a drink. I live on the third floor. I quit answering the bell—it doesn't do any good.

Who tries to differentiate? Who wants to hear a life story these days? Always there is the profound suspicion that they are charlatans, all of them, all professionals. Another year of this and the suspicion will be gone.

Begging was once a good racket, like banking. There was money to be made. They arrested a man in 1929 in front of the First National Bank when they discovered that he lifted himself up on his crutches at the end of the day and swung around the corner where a Cadillac was waiting. He had \$40,000 in the bank. If you were deformed, and still not horrible, and you had a good "spot" and took care of the copper on the beat, you made good money. If you were deformed and horrible, you could move through the streets and old ladies in lace collars would give you a quarter and keep their heads averted. There is still some of that, and who differentiates? The old fellow who played his blind violin at the corner of Michigan and Harrison for fifteen or twenty years died a few months ago and the thirty cents in his cup was all he had.

THEY tell me there are 1,558,843 "gainful workers" in Chicago, a conservative 750,000 of whom are out of gainful work. At least 130,000 families are subsisting entirely on charity. The third winter is coming up. Private and public strongboxes are almost hollow. Relatives and friends are on their uppers, after two years of doubled burden and quartered income. Some of the half million will die this winter—some died last winter and the winter before. The soup lines and the relief stations will be crowded with deserving and undeserving, and there is no one to differentiate. I suppose it would take a lot of money to differentiate, for to differentiate means to investigate. The givers of funds would set up a holler, I don't doubt, if half their money was used in the administration of the other half. They want to feed people, any people. That is laudable, in itself. Giving, this winter, will not be easy for many, and many will have to give. But I think it would be intelligent if as much as half of what money there is is spent in feeding the people who deserve to be kept alive. I suspect that, generally, three-fourths of the money feeds men whose one contribution to civilization, if they are given a chance, is liable to be the reproduction of their kind.

The communists, or perhaps I should say Communists, are getting along very poorly. Communism, like all great institutions, requires a certain amount of cash on hand, and the exchequer of District 8 is moaning low. Together with this, the Cause has been met so coldly by the *nouveau pauvre* that plans for the Big Push, purportedly from Moscow, have been indefinitely postponed.

Observation on a modest scale has convinced

B E G G A R Y

me that there will be no revolution, even if Hoover is reelected. Riots there will be, riots like last winter's, weak, sporadic, unorganized. This thing has struck so suddenly—three years is an instant in social cataclysms—that its victims are too punch-drunk, too staggered, to fight. It will take a hundred years more of this. It will take a peasantry, and we haven't had a peasantry for the last sixty-five years. As for the beggars, the vocation boys, they do not make good revolutionists—Communism promises work for all, and that is no attraction.

There is, it is true, a lighter side, much lighter, to the whole business. Among the "upper middle classes," among those who are reasonably certain that they will have enough to eat, and enough to drink, come what may, or come what may not, it is a very graceful matter to be out of work. It is, I find, actually becoming fashionable. You can readily imagine what socially desirable people were turned loose by the collapse of the better banks and business houses and by reductions in the staffs of newspapers, universities, hospitals, libraries and executive departments of major industries.

The members of this new leisure class rather enjoyed week-ending all week, golfing, getting out in the country, lolling around the art museums or the clubs or the zoo. As their ranks increased, they adopted a definite attitude of smug content. They belonged. People who went downtown every day were vulgar. A man with a job was a menace to organized society. It will be too bad if things pick up, because this admirable new social structure will, I am afraid, have to be abandoned. If things go on as they are, however, it will only be a question of how much longer the decent, law-abiding citizens of this community are going to tolerate the employed.

The
CHICAGOAN

OldMagazineArticles.com