

Flag day

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I mentioned the beat a moment ago; that reminds me of the policeman whom I met one day and who showed considerable interest in my doings. Of course, lots of people use me as an information centre, but *his* quest for knowledge seemed interminable. He was very friendly, and he was the first person to hear of my delight when an elderly, shabbily dressed woman most unexpectedly gave me a ten-shilling note. As I stood talking to him the ribbon which held my basket of flags round my neck suddenly gave, the basket dropped and all the roses scattered all over the pavement. It must have been a pretty picture, the constable and I squatting on the ground off Oxford Street gathering flowers!

Children often want to know all about my job, too. Some precocious little boy may put some very direct and searching questions — good thing I learned to deal with awkward questions with my own children. When people are accompanied by children I always pin the flag on the youngsters' coats first, and only if I consider the adults' contribution to be in proportion to their appearance do I give a flag to them. Of course, my ruse does not always succeed and I have to part with three or even four flags for the price of a tanner — and that, if you please, usually happens with the more prosperous-looking family. What an example to their offspring!

Talking of examples, I have often wondered what a child's attitude is to the obvious blunt lies his father or mother tells me now and then. I have always believed in scrupulous honesty with my own children — what will be the reaction of a child when he catches his elders fibbing?

One of the most exciting aspects of flag selling is the fun of speculation. "I don't suppose I shall get a penny from that old sourpuss" — I may be right, but I may just as easily receive 2/6. "That old clergyman looks both well-off and kindly — I am sure he will respond handsomely." But the result is an apologetic "Sorry". Funnily enough, I never seem to be lucky with "rev. gentlemen" on flag days, though the clergymen I know personally are all most generous.

On the few occasions when I received a note it was always from the most unexpected quarter. Of the two biggest surprises I ever had, the first was when, at 4 p.m., I approached an elderly lady and she gave me £1. "I am so glad you have asked me, I have had the money ready all day, but nobody has come up to me, and I already thought I had to take it back home again." Well, well! Incidentally many people never offer their contribution until they are approached.

The second big surprise I had when a slovenly-dressed intellectual started to rant against vivisection — or was it anti? In vain did I try to explain that the collection had nothing to do with animals at all. He utterly ignored me and thundered on. In the end I gave up resignedly, convinced that he was more than just under a misapprehension. Then suddenly the outburst stopped as abruptly as it had started, and with a flourish he placed two florins on the top of my tin and retreated hastily. I was flabbergasted and for once I could not even utter an adequate thank you.

I have often been asked where I like collecting best. I have done it in Piccadilly and Bloomsbury, in the City and in Mayfair, near the Law Courts and round Marble

Arch, and still I have no preference. I find people interesting anywhere, and in every district the flag trade has its ups and downs; it can be brisk and lively one minute with even a mild queue starting, and then it can drop in a moment and I may get a string of negative replies. But soon the lull is over and things start happening again. I usually set out at 9 a.m. and the first half-hour is invariably the longest.

Of course, this work has taught me to look upon other flag sellers as a rather unique species, and I treat them with much more sympathy and respect than I used to. I believe my family, too, have acquired a different attitude to street collectors, having heard me airing my views on the general public during the "post mortems".

I should like to emphasize that I by no means expect every man, woman and child to dip into his or her purse. I always accept — I hope gracefully — a polite refusal and respect principles which may lie behind it. I even prefer a plain, definite "No" to vague excuses. It is surprising the lengths to which some people go to tell you that they had already had a flag (or even several), that they had lost it, or that they had left it at the office, or that they had given it away. Sometimes they sound convincing, but mostly, I am afraid, my face shows my disbelief.

A favourite excuse often offered by young men in pairs is that they share a flag to which I usually reply by asking if they also share the girl-friend — it almost always produces results!

Some people will execute elaborate zig-zag movements to dodge me. A man once tried to evade me by crossing the road in haste and nearly got run over. He stepped back and had the grace to apologize and to give me a heavy silver piece.

Occasionally I meet the same people more than once. If they belong to the dodger variety I always pretend that I don't remember them and patiently approach them again and again. Sometimes they give up in sheer desperation.

The police rules are that a seller must not accost a member of the public already wearing a flag. Sometimes this is inevitable, but I do wish people would not hide their flag inside their coat or on the reverse side of their lapel. Men in uniform are not allowed to wear flags, but this need not prevent them from giving the money. In fact I often meet people who make a donation, though refusing to take a flag.

Whenever a flag day is over I am relieved and exhilarated at the same time. Looking at it in terms of physical strain I am convinced that I can't face such a day again. But once at home refreshed and relaxed I can hardly wait to tell the family of my latest experiences, and they are as anxious as I am myself to know the sum total of my efforts. The post-card announcing the results is always a surprise — my forecast is invariably a long way out.

And soon another flag day approaches, and as it comes nearer my excitement grows; I feel full of anticipation and hope for a higher total than ever. And on the big morning my family wish me luck and I set out confidently on yet another adventure.

Mariann.