

ON FLOOR SWEEPING

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I AM working my way through college. In the past years I have held more or less colourless summer jobs, but one year I acquired proficiency in an extremely interesting art—the *Art of Floor Sweeping*.

Before I develop the body of my discourse, allow me to speak a word of caution to the scoffers, to those who would say, "Huh! Floor sweeping? Heck, there's no art to that. Why, my poor old mother swept floors before you were born!" To these people I can only say that there is a very definite art to floor sweeping. And as for their dear old mothers, well, they either had the art or suffered from the lack of it. Floor sweeping is not so simple as it looks. It is a highly technical job, and the floor sweepers in any establishment are regarded as valuable personnel.

Now back to my theme. That summer I was hired by a high ranking dignitary of a government-controlled board, the purpose of which is to maintain port installations, that is piers, loading equipment, etc. This dignitary appraised the extent of my physical fitness with a quick and critical glance, and directed me to Mr. X., foreman of Piers 41 to 50.

After seeming hours I found Mr. X. and was somewhat taken back with his appearance. Here was not the type of man to whom I was accustomed—here was the rough and ready, I-fight-for-what-I-get type of man. I swallowed hard, stuck out my chest, tried to adopt a pugilistic pose, and still trembling with fear, I stated my business. Immediately an ugly smirk spread over the man's forbidding countenance. I detested him. His first remark was neither re-assuring nor ingratiating. "A college student, huh? Well, brother, down here you are no better than anybody else. And for this job you'll have to swallow your pride." Again I swallowed hard, trying to liquidate my pride altogether, and ventured to ask him what my summer's occupation would be. "You'll be a floor sweeper. If you're lucky, you may get moved to something more up your alley before the summer's over."

So with this retort to think about, with this rapidly formed dislike for my immediate superior, I started my career as a floor sweeper.

Now that I look back on it all, I find that there are five

stages through which the aspiring floor sweeper must pass. They are: (1) the stage of instruction; (2) the stage of blister-neck-back-leg-foot-pigeon trouble; (3) the stage of accomplishment; (4) the stage of laziness; (5) the stage of acceptance. I shall treat each of these in chronological sequence.

First, the period of instruction. This is the period in which I received instructions from an expert and veteran floor sweeper. He demonstrated the correct way to hold the broom—since I am right handed, I had to place my left hand at the middle of the handle, right hand at the top. He cautioned me not to hold the broom in too tight a manner, as that would foster the formation of annoying sores on my hands. He showed me the correct stroke to use—sweeping with the breeze (none of the doors on the piers were in working order, so the breezes blew unhampered), with a slow, short stroke. The stroke is short and slow in order to prevent the formation of a suffocating cloud of dust. The government cannot afford "dust bane". These were the basic rules in the floor sweeping profession, and the veteran left me, and I tried the art alone.

Having started on my own, my troubles began. I proceeded into the blister-neck-back-legs-feet-pigeon period. Now I found that though I was following the rules perfectly I could not keep pace with the veterans. And of course I wanted to create a good impression with that terribly austere foreman. I reasoned that such an impression could not be created if I were trailing about fifty yards behind the old hands. So I disregarded the rules, grasped the broom in any fashion as tightly as I could, and I began to overtake the veterans. Then to my dismay I suddenly found that my hands were terribly irritated, my back was beginning to pain, my neck was stiff from always looking down, and sharp pains were shooting through my legs and feet. I felt that this would pass off if I continued sweeping at this rate. When I caught up with the veterans, they were no longer the indulgent "old hands"—they were enraged at my attempt to suffocate them, my hands were blistered, and I was a veritable bundle of aches. I discovered a new menace to my success, the pigeons—millions of them—who inhabit the sheds. Every time they swooped overhead with their dive-bombing tactics, I found myself murmuring the old gag, "Thank Heaven, cows don't fly." They carried on a war of nerves.

After three weeks of this suffering I began to feel better about the whole thing. The blisters had developed into cal-

louses, and the aches and pains had somehow disappeared. I was then entering the period of accomplishment. This was the period in which I felt very well satisfied with myself—I had acquired a new art. I felt proud that I had been able to stick at the arduous task for so long. I took a great interest and pride in my sweeping—I strove to sweep cleaner and faster than the old hands. Once again, however, I was arousing the enmity of these veterans—I was setting too fast a pace. Irate glances told me—I am a sensitive person—that something was wrong, but I didn't know just what, until one of the more conscientious veterans told me that I was working too fast, that I was doing too much in my eight hours. So I entered another period of my career.

This was the fourth stage, or the stage of laziness. I was encouraged by the veterans to dodge out for a smoke, or to go to the canteen, or to sit on the sea-wall and talk. It was not the veterans alone who encouraged me in this. It was also a desire to preserve my sanity. I found I was gradually losing my self-control. The eternal sameness of the slow, short stroke was beginning to wear on my nerves. The continual sight of the barren floor began to foster illusions of self-grandeur. So I knew it was time to knock off for a smoke. I found myself smoking more than ever before—I began to worry about nicotine poisoning. I consoled myself, however, with the thought that I would rather drop dead of a tobacco heart on the pier than end my days in the asylum. Then I became bolder—I found myself seeking out a comfortable place in which to snooze—always, of course, relying on one of my buddies to warn me of the approach of that loathesome foreman.

I was then entering the last stage in the evolution of a floor sweeper. This was the period of acceptance. This was the period in which the veterans welcomed me into their midst as a buddy and a kindred spirit. I found, too, that I was on different terms with that here-to-fore detestable foreman. To him I had proved my mettle, I had shown that I was gifted with a certain quality of perseverance, and he no longer regarded me as a pseudo-intellectual college student who would attempt to be a man in a man's world. He accepted me as an equal in the gentle art of floor sweeping. Another bit of evidence pointing to the fact that I was a qualified floor sweeper was presented when the organizer for the American Brotherhood of Floor-sweepers came and attempted to induce me to become a brother, for the price of five dollars.

Now that I was a full fledged floor sweeper, I began to adopt the philosophy of the floor sweepers which seems to be,

Sweep for the night is coming,
When man sweeps no more.

Some floor sweepers assert that their philosophy is better summed up in the saying, "Sweep, sleep, and be merry, for tomorrow we sweep again."

And so, my friends, I hope I have given you some insight into the profession of floor sweeping. There are other fine points to remember besides those I have already mentioned, if you would be a successful member of the profession. For example, always use your own broom—you get the bristles bent to your way of sweeping, and another person's broom will hamper your efficiency; always use a stroke broom, never a push broom—the former enables you to sweep in corners—and above all, do as little sweeping as possible.

In closing, I would reiterate, floor sweeping is definitely an art. It is an art worthy of cultivation. As an off-the-record remark, I would confide in you that I am thinking of writing a book on floor sweeping, which, thanks to my experiences, I will entitle "I Uncover the Waterfront".
