



Before you read

Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which what happened was the opposite of what you expected? If so, you are familiar with the 'irony' of the situation, which is often embarrassing. The story that you are going to read has a number of such situations.

- ✧ Soapy is a homeless, jobless man.
- ✧ Winter is fast approaching and Soapy must have a place to stay.
- ✧ Soapy comes to a decision, at last.

SOAPY moved restlessly on his seat in Madison Square. There are certain signs to show that winter is coming. Birds begin to fly south. People want new warm coats. And Soapy moves restlessly on his seat in the park. When you see these signs, you know that winter is near.

A dead leaf fell at Soapy's feet. That was a special sign for him that winter was coming. It was time for all who lived in Madison Square to prepare.

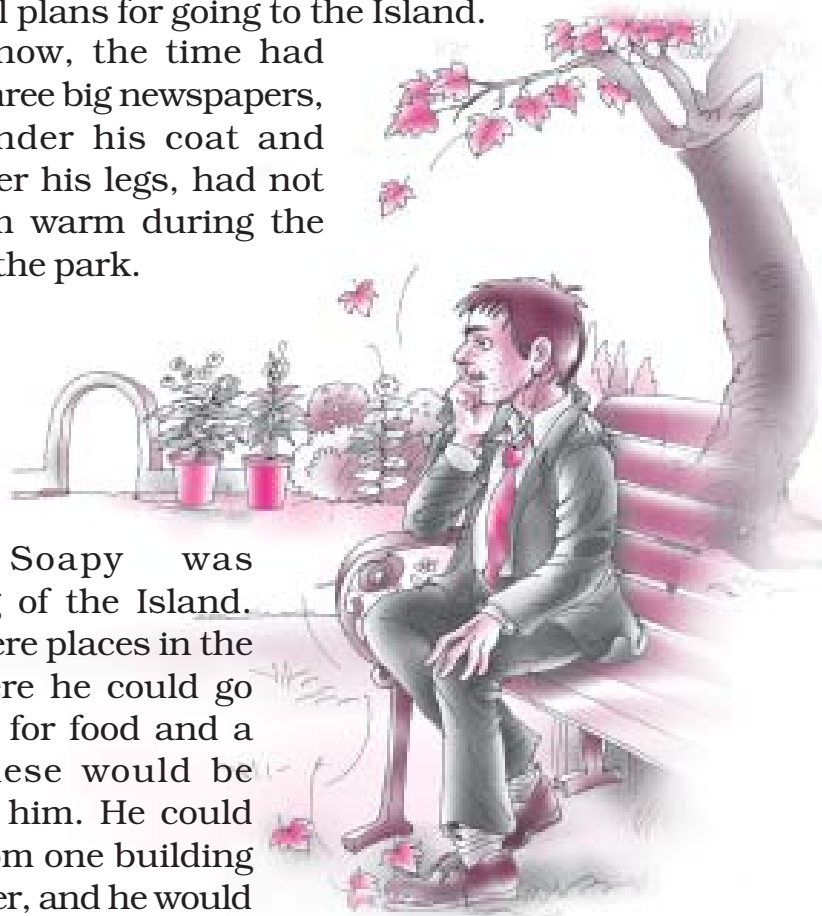
Soapy's mind now realised that fact. The time had come. He had to find some way to take care of himself during the cold weather. And, therefore, he moved restlessly on his seat.

Soapy's hopes for the winter were not very high. He was not thinking of sailing away on a ship. He was not thinking of southern skies, or of the Bay of Naples. Three months in the prison on Blackwell's Island was what he wanted. Three months of food every day and a bed every night, three months safe from the cold north wind and safe from cops. This is what Soapy wanted most in the world.

For years, Blackwell's Island had been his winter home. Richer New Yorkers made their plans to go to Florida or to the shore of the Mediterranean Sea each winter. Soapy made his small plans for going to the Island.

And now, the time had come. Three big newspapers, some under his coat and some over his legs, had not kept him warm during the night in the park.

So Soapy was thinking of the Island. There were places in the city where he could go and ask for food and a bed. These would be given to him. He could move from one building to another, and he would



southern skies: warmer places **Blackwell's Island:** name of a prison (If Soapy went to prison, the government would look after his food and stay.) **cop:** policeman (American English)

be taken care of through the winter. But he liked Blackwell's Island better.

Soapy's spirit was proud. If he went to any of these places, there were certain things he had to do. In one way or another, he would have to pay for what they gave him. They would not ask him for money. But they would make him wash his whole body. They would make him answer questions. They would want to know everything about his life.

No. Prison was better than that. The prison had rules that he would have to follow. But in prison, a gentleman's own life was still his own life.

Soapy, having decided to go to the Island, at once began to move towards his desire.

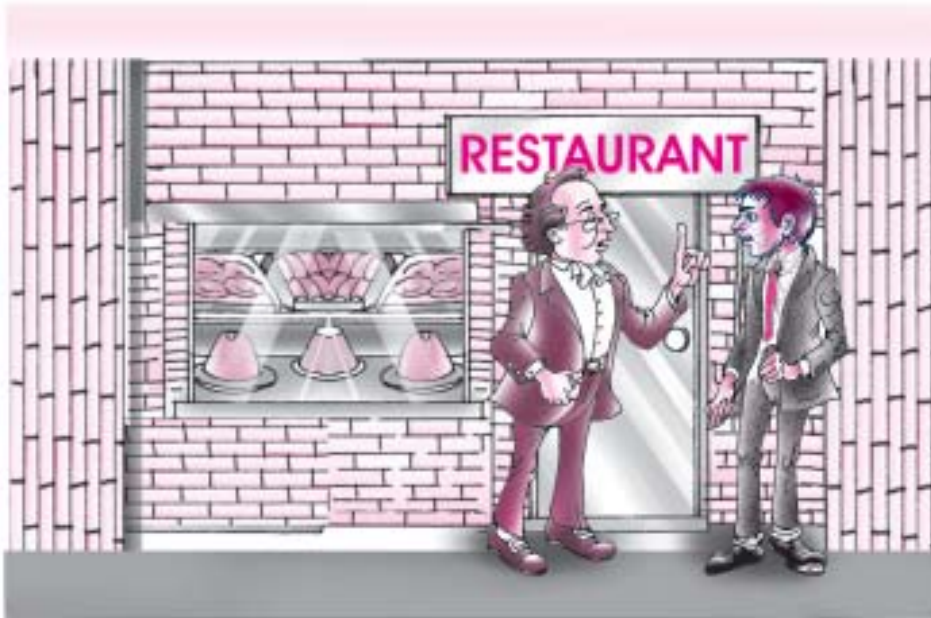
- ✧ Soapy does his best to be on the wrong side of the law.
- ✧ He tries three tricks, all in vain.
- ✧ The fear that no cop will ever catch him makes him sick at heart.

There were many easy ways of doing this. The most pleasant way was to go and have a good dinner at some fine restaurant. Then he would say that he had no money to pay. And then a cop would be called. It would all be done very quietly. The cop would arrest him. He would be taken to a judge. The judge would do the rest.

Soapy left his seat and walked slowly out of Madison Square to the place where the great street called Broadway and Fifth Avenue meet. He went across this wide space and started north on Broadway. He stopped at a large and brightly lighted restaurant. This was where the best food and the best people in the best clothes appeared every evening.

Soapy believed that above his legs he looked all right. His face was clean. His coat was good enough. If he could get to a table, he believed that success would be his. The





part of him that would be seen above the table would look all right. The waiter would bring him what he asked for.

He began thinking of what he would like to eat. In his mind he could see the whole dinner. The cost would not be too high. He did not want the restaurant people to feel any real anger. But the dinner would leave him filled and happy for the journey to his winter home.

But as Soapy put his foot inside the restaurant door, the head waiter saw his broken old shoes and the torn clothes that covered his legs. Strong and ready hands turned Soapy around and moved him quietly and quickly outside again.

Soapy turned off Broadway. It seemed that this most easy way to the Island was not to be his. He must think of some other way of getting there.

At a corner of Sixth Avenue was a shop with a wide glass window, bright with electric lights. Soapy picked up a big stone and threw it through the glass. People came running around the corner. A cop was the first among them. Soapy stood still, and he smiled when he saw the cop.



“Where’s the man that did that?” asked the cop.

“Don’t you think that I might have done it?” said Soapy. He was friendly and happy. What he wanted was coming towards him.

But the cop’s mind would not consider Soapy. Men who break windows do not stop there to talk to cops. They run away as fast as they can. The cop saw a man further along the street, running. He ran after him. And Soapy, sick at heart, walked slowly away. He had failed two times.

Across the street was another restaurant. It was not so fine as the one on Broadway. The people who went there were not so rich. Its food was not so good. Into this Soapy took his old shoes and his torn clothes, and no one stopped him. He sat down at a table and was soon eating a big dinner.



When he had finished, he said that he had no money.

“Get busy and call a cop,” said Soapy. “And don’t keep a gentleman waiting.”

“No cop for you,” said the waiter. He called another waiter.

The two waiters threw Soapy upon his left ear on the hard street outside.

He stood up slowly, one part at a time, and beat the dust from his clothes. Prison seemed only a happy dream. The Island seemed very far away.

A cop who was standing near laughed and walked away. Soapy started moving again. When he stopped, he was near several theatres. In this part of the city, streets are brighter and hearts are more joyful than in other parts. Women and men in rich warm coats moved happily in the winter air.

A sudden fear caught Soapy. No cop was going to arrest him.



- ✧ Soapy tries his luck twice again, but cops remain indifferent as ever.
- ✧ Soapy is suddenly reminded of his childhood home and mother, and resolves to turn over a new leaf.
- ✧ Feeling a hand on his arm, Soapy turns around to see the broad face of a cop.

Then he came to another cop standing in front of a big theatre. He thought of something else to try.

He began to shout as if he had too much to drink. His voice was as loud as he could make it. He danced, he cried out.

And the cop turned his back to Soapy, and said to a man standing near him, "It's one of those college boys. He won't hurt anything. We have orders to let them shout."

Soapy was quiet. Was no cop going to touch him? He began to think of the Island as if it were as far away as a star. He pulled his thin coat around him. The wind was very cold.

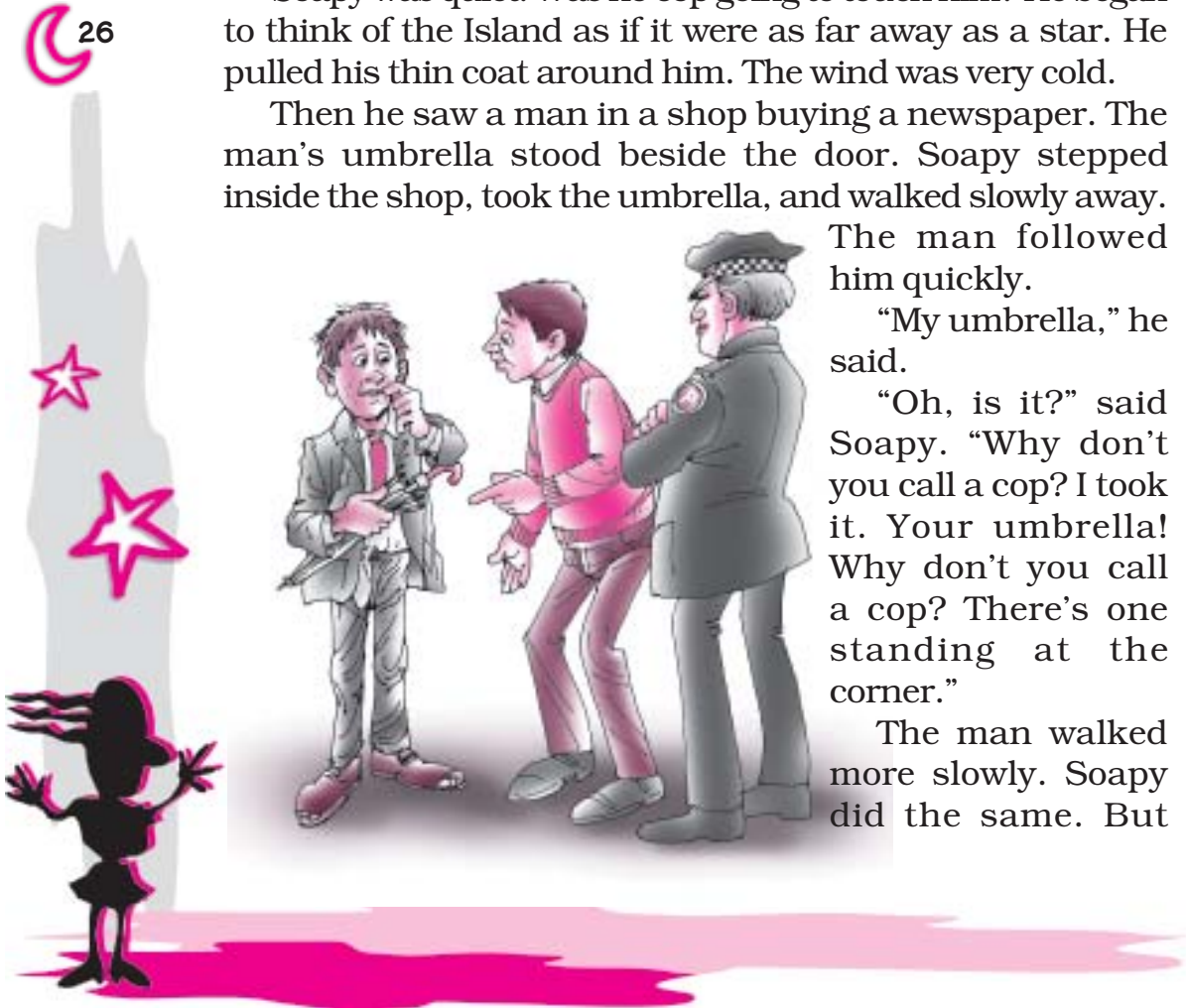
Then he saw a man in a shop buying a newspaper. The man's umbrella stood beside the door. Soapy stepped inside the shop, took the umbrella, and walked slowly away.

The man followed him quickly.

"My umbrella," he said.

"Oh, is it?" said Soapy. "Why don't you call a cop? I took it. Your umbrella! Why don't you call a cop? There's one standing at the corner."

The man walked more slowly. Soapy did the same. But



he had a feeling that he was going to fail again. The cop looked at the two men.

“I—” said the umbrella man “— that is — you know how these things happen; if that’s your umbrella, I’m very sorry. I found it this morning in a restaurant. If you say it’s yours I hope you’ll—”

“It’s mine!” cried Soapy, with anger in his voice.

The umbrella man hurried away. The cop helped a lady across the street. Soapy walked east. He threw the umbrella as far as he could throw it. He talked to himself about cops and what he thought of them. Because he wished to be arrested, they seemed to believe he was like a king who could do no wrong.

At last, Soapy came to one of the quiet streets on the side of the city. He turned here and began to walk south toward Madison Square. He was going home, although home was only a seat in a park.

But at a very quiet corner, Soapy stopped. Here was his old childhood home. Through one window, he could see a soft light shining. That had been his living room, where he had spent many happy peaceful moments. Sweet music came to Soapy’s ears and seemed to hold him there.

The moon was above, peaceful and bright. There were few people passing. He could hear birds high above him. And the music that came from the room held Soapy there, for he had known it well long ago. In those days, his life contained such things as mothers and flowers and high hopes and friends and clean thoughts and clean clothes.

There was a sudden and wonderful change in his soul. He saw with sick fear how he had fallen. He saw his worthless days, his wrong desires, his dead hopes, the lost power of his mind.

And also, in a moment, his heart answered this change in his soul. He would fight to change his life. He would pull himself up, out of the mud. He would make a man of himself again.





There was time. He was young enough. He would find his old purpose in life, and follow it. That sweet music had changed him. Tomorrow he would find work. A man had once offered him a job. He would find that man tomorrow. He would be somebody in the world. He would. Soapy felt a hand on his arm. He looked quickly around into the broad face of a cop.

“What are you doing hanging around here?” asked the cop.

“Nothing,” said Soapy.

“You think I believe that?” said the cop.

Full of his new strength, Soapy began to argue. And it is not wise to argue with a New York cop.

“Come along,” said the cop.

“Three months prison on Blackwell’s Island,” said the judge to Soapy next morning.

O. HENRY



Exercises

Answer the following questions.

1. What are some of the signs of approaching winter referred to in the text?
2. Write 'True' or 'False' against each of the following.
 - (i) Soapy did not want to go to prison. _____
 - (ii) Soapy had been to prison several times. _____
 - (iii) It was not possible for Soapy to survive in the city through the winter. _____
 - (iv) Soapy hated to answer questions of a personal nature. _____
3. What was Soapy's first plan? Why did it not work?
4. "But the cop's mind would not consider Soapy". What did the cop not consider, and why?
5. "We have orders to let them shout". What is the policeman referring to?
6. Write 'True' or 'False' against each of the following.
 - (i) Soapy stole a man's umbrella. _____
 - (ii) The owner of the umbrella offered to give it to Soapy. _____
 - (iii) The man had stolen the umbrella that was now Soapy's. _____
 - (iv) Soapy threw away the umbrella. _____
7. "There was a sudden and wonderful change in his soul". What brought about the change in Soapy?

Discuss the following topics in groups.

1. Suppose no cop came at the end. What would Soapy's life be like through the winter?
2. Retell an episode in the story which is a good example of irony in a situation.

