

The Five-Finger Discount

by Kern Hagg

(#9 in a Series)

In 1958, I was 10-years old, and my friends and I went through a phase of having sticky fingers. We were shoplifting at the Arlington Market and doing it just for the thrill of the act. One day after school, I rode my bike up to Walgreens with a friend. He stole a Mad magazine by putting it inside his jacket. I stole a 3 Musketeers bar, and at the time, they were three for 11 cents. Despite having (2) \$1.00 bills in my pocket, I was taking 4 cents of merchandise just for the apparent rush of getting away with something I knew we should not be doing. My friend made it out the door, but I did not. As I approached the exit door, I had a man's hand on my shoulder, and he invited me to follow him back to the pharmacy section. He walked me behind the counter area to the backroom where he sat me at a stool underneath an incandescent lightbulb. He then asked for my home phone number, and he dialed it while I was sitting there. I could hear my mother saying, "That has to be another boy using my son's name, because my son would never do that." The pharmacist assured my mother that it was her son, and he asked that she come to the store immediately. I could hear her at the pharmacy counter crying as the pharmacist described what I had done. He told Mom that he would not call the police, but he did not want to see me in the store for one year, and after that first anniversary, he did not ever want to see me in the store without my mother or father being with me. I felt like a criminal because I was one. When Dad got home that night, he decided to take my Christmas present (a brand-new 26" bicycle) and chain it to a radiator in the garage for one year. I could not ride that bike in the warm weather months for a solid year and that punishment was nothing compared to the shame I felt for having put my mother through that ordeal.

I can honestly say that I never shoplifted anything ever again. I do not remember ever stealing anything ever again. I do not cheat on my income taxes or do anything else that would be untoward. That day at Walgreens taught me a lesson that I would never forget for the rest of my life. Simply said, "crime doesn't pay." But in my case, the shame and humiliation I caused my parents was not worth a 4-cent candy bar, and the experience truly changed me as a person for the rest of my life. Ironically, 40 years later, I was in the area and I needed to stop by Walgreens to buy a greeting card. Even then, as I walked into the store, I felt that I was acting improperly because I was alone and unaccompanied by either of my parents. With my \$2.00, I could have purchased 50 candy bars, but no, I had to opt for the cheap thrill, and it certainly was not worth it. I never forgot that lesson for the rest of my life.