

The Beggar

By Maurice Level

It was growing dark, and the beggar stopped at a ditch by the side of the road and looked for a corner where he could spend the night. He rolled himself up in a sack that was his nearest approach to an overcoat, placed the little packet he carried on the end of his stick under his head for a pillow, and exhausted by fatigue and hunger, sank down and watched the stars prick through the dark sky.

The road, which was bordered by woods, was deserted. The birds were asleep in the trees. Away in the distance the village made a big black patch, and a lump came into the old man's throat as he lay there in the calm and silence.

He had never known his parents. Picked up out of charity, he had been brought up on a farm,, but at an early age he had taken to the road looking for work that would provide him with food. Life had been very hard on him. He had never known anything of it but miseries: long winter nights spent under the shadow of mills; the shame of begging, the desire to die, to go to sleep and never wake again. All the men he had come in contact with had been suspicious and unkind. His great trouble was that every one seemed to fear him; children ran away when they saw him; the dogs barked at his dusty rags.

But in spite of it all he bore no one any ill-will; he had a simple, kindly nature dulled by misfortune.

He was falling asleep when horse-bells sounded in the distance. He raised his head and saw a bright light moving above the ground. He watched it without interest. He could distinguish a heavy wagon and a big horse. The load was so high and so broad it seemed to fill the road. A man walked near the horse humming a song.

Soon the song ceased. The road was uphill. The hoofs of the horse struck and grated violently on the stones. With voice and whip the man urged the animal on:

“Gee up! . . . Up.”

It was pulling with all its strength, its neck stretched out. Twice or thrice it stopped, almost fell on its knees, got up again and made an effort that strained its hide from shoulder to hind-quarters.

But it was winded, and the wagon stopped. The wagoner, his shoulder against the wheel, his hands on the spokes, cried still louder:

“Up! Gee up . . . up there! . . .”

In vain the horse strained all its muscles: the cart did not move.

“Up there! Up . . .”

Its feet apart, its nostrils throbbing, the animal stood still, trembling with the strain of keeping the front of its hoofs in the soil so that it should not be dragged back by the enormous load. As he bent over the wheel the wagoner caught sight of the beggar sitting on the edge of the ditch, and hailed him:

“A hand, comrade! The brute won't go any further. Come and help to give a push.”

The beggar got up and pushing with all his feeble strength cried with the other:

“Up, up! . . .”

It was useless.

Quickly exhausted and full of pity, the beggar said:

“Let him get his breath. It’s too heavy for him.”

“Not a bit of it. He’s a cowardly brute. If I give in to him now, he’ll never pull another load up a hill. Up there! Gee up! . . . Get a stone to wedge up the wheel. We’ll make him go across the road to get a move on.”

The beggar brought a big stone.

“Like this,” said the wagoner. “I’ll stay at the wheel. Here’s the whip. Take the bit, head to the left, and lash his legs as hard as you can. That’ll bring him to.”

Stung by pain, the horse made a big effort.

The stones ground and flashed under his feet.

“That’s it! That’s it!”

But as the horse strained to one side, the wagoner, bending to push the stone under the wheel, slipped. The horse was drawn back. The man gave a cry and fell.

He was on his back, his face convulsed, his eyes wild, his two elbows digging into the soil, his strong hands clutching the rim of the wheel as he tried to stop it from passing over his chest.

In a voice of agony he shouted:

“Pull him forward! Pull him forward! He’s crushing me . . .”

Guessing, without seeing, what had happened, the beggar belabored the horse with both lash and handle. But the unwilling animal sank on its knees, rolled on its side, and the cart tilted forward, the shafts on the ground; the lantern upset and went out, and nothing could be heard in the darkness but the sharp breathing of the horse and the stifled moan of the man:

“Go forward . . . go forward . . .”

Unable to get the animal up, the beggar rushed to the wagoner trying to free him. But he was firmly held by the wheel. By a prodigious effort he was managing to keep it an inch or two from his body; a slip, a loss of strength, and it would mean being crushed to death . . . He himself understood this so clearly that when he saw the beggar bending over him, he yelled:

“Don’t touch! Don’t touch! . . . run to the village . . . quick . . . to my father’s house . . . the Luchats . . . the first farm to the right . . . tell them to bring . . . help . . . I can keep like this for ten minutes . . . quick . . .”

The beggar ran up the hill at full speed. He rushed into the village which lay straight in front of him. All the shutters were closed. There were no lights; not a soul to be seen anywhere. Dogs barked furiously as he passed, but he heard nothing, saw nothing, his mind concentrated on the awful vision of the man who was lying at the bottom of the hill holding off the great weight that was sinking down on him.

At last he stopped. Before him the road stretched out on the level. At his right a building stood behind a courtyard. A shaft of light came from the window. This must be the house. He hammered on the shutters with his fists.

A voice asked:

“Is that you, Jules?”

Completely out of breath because of the pace he had come at, he had no voice to reply; he could only keep on knocking. He heard the creaking of a bed, steps on the boards. The window opened, and the head of a sleepy man appeared in the square of light:

“Is that you, Jules?”

He had recovered enough voice to pant:

“No, but I have come to . . .”

The farmer did not let him finish.

“What the devil are you doing here? Waking people at this hour of the night!”

He shut the window with a bang, muttering:

“A dirty tramp. . . A good-for-nothing . . .”

Stupefied by the brutality of the voice and action, the beggar stood transfixed . . . He thought:

“What did they think I wanted? What harm was I doing . . . I suppose I did disturb their sleep . . . If they only knew, poor things . . .”

He knocked timidly on the shutter again. From inside the voice cried:

“Still there! . . . Wait a bit! You’ll be sorry if I get up to you.”

He had got his breath again, and with it came courage.

“Open the window . . .”

“Go about your business . . .”

“Open the window! . . .”

This time the window opened, and so quickly he had to jump on one side to get out of the way of the shutter. The farmer stood there, furious, a gun in his hand.

“Do you hear what I say, you starveling? If you don’t clear out and quickly, it’s an ounce of lead you get.”

The hard voice of a woman called from the bed:

“Fire at him . . . a good riddance for everybody if you do! They’re no good for anything but thieving, those tramps . . . and worse than thieving . . .”

Frightened by the gun that was pointed at him, the beggar retreated into the darkness. He trembled and for a moment forgot the poor wretch who was perhaps at that very moment dying on the road. For the first time a bitter anger rose in him. Never before had he felt so despised and rejected.

Suppose he had been starving, suppose he had knocked to beg for shelter? Had he not a right to a litter of straw near the cattle? to a crust of bread with the dogs? . . . Apparently his rags did not cover even a human being, seeing that the rich could threaten to kill him . . .

His first impulse was to raise his stick and beat upon the shutter, then he reflected:

“If I knock again he will fire . . . If I call, it will rouse the village and they will have knocked me senseless before I can explain what I want. If I go somewhere else for help, it will be just the same . . .”

After a moment of hesitation he set off at a gallop to go back and try to save unaided the comrade of a few minutes. He ran wildly, urged forward by the fear of what might have happened while he was away . . . What would he see when he got there . . .

This terror lent him the strength of the legs of a young man, and he was soon back near the place where the wagon had stopped. He cried:

“Comrade!”

No reply. He called again:

“Comrade!”

The darkness was so dense he could not find the horse . . . But he heard a neighing and went forward. The animal, still on its side, was lying a few steps from him, the wagon tilted forwards.

“Comrade! Comrade!”

He bent down, and as the moon came out from behind a cloud he saw the man with his arms spread out like a cross, his eyes shut, blood coming from his mouth. The wheel, which seemed enormous, was buried in his chest as in a rut.

Unable to do anything more for the poor mutilated creature, his anger against the parents blazed up more fiercely than before. A desire for revenge gripped him; he ran back to the farm,

and this time he had no fear of the gun, no feeling but one of savage joy as he beat on the shutters.

“Is that you, Jules?”

He made no reply. When the window opened and he saw the farmer’s face and again heard the question, he replied:

“No! It’s the starveling who came here before to tell you your son lay dying on the road.”

The terrified voice of the mother mingled with that of the father:

“What does he say? . . . What does he say? . . . Come in . . . quick, quick . . .”

But he pulled his hat down over his eyes and walked slowly away as he murmured:

“I’ve something else to do now . . . There’s no need to be in such a hurry. You are too late . . . It was when I came before that you ought to have made haste. He’s got the whole load of hay on his ribs now.”

“Quick, quick, father!” sobbed the woman. “Run! Run!”

As he drew on some clothes, the father shouted:

“Where is he? . . . Listen . . . Come back . . . For the love of God tell . . .”

But the beggar, his stick on his shoulder, was lost in the darkness.

And the only reply was the call of a cock that had been awakened by the voices and crowed from a dunghill, and the howling of the dog that raised its head and bayed at the moon.