

The Beggar

By Guy de Maupassant

He had known better days, despite his wretchedness and his infirmity.

At the age of fifteen he had had both legs crushed by a carriage on the high-road of Yarville. Since then he begged, dragging himself along the roads, across the farm-yards, balanced on his crutches, which had made his shoulders mount as high as his ears, so that his head seemed sunk between two mountains.

A child found in a ditch by the curé of Les Billettes, on All Souls' Eve, and baptized, for that reason, Nicolas Toussaint, he had been brought up on charity, and had remained a stranger to all instruction. It was after the village baker had given him several glasses of brandy to drink that he had lamed his legs. And since then, a laughing-stock and a vagabond, he knew of nothing else to do but to hold out his hand and beg.

Formerly the Baroness d'Avary had allowed him to sleep in a kind of niche full of straw beside the hen-house at the farm, which was under the castle walls; and on bad days he was sure of finding a piece of bread and a glass of cider in her kitchen. He also often got a few sous thrown him by the old lady from the top of her steps or from the windows of her chamber. Now she was dead.

In the villages they hardly gave him anything: they knew him too well; this forty years they were tired of seeing him carrying about his ragged and deformed body from hut to hut on his two wooden joints. And yet he did not want to go away, because he knew of nothing else on earth but this corner of a country, these three or four hamlets in which he had dragged about his miserable life. He had set a boundary to his beggarhood, and he would never have thought of passing the limits which he was not accustomed to cross.

He did not know whether the world extended very much farther beyond the trees which had always bounded his sight. He never asked himself that. And when the peasants, tired of always meeting him on the borders of their fields or along their ditches, cried at him, "Why don't you go to the other villages instead of forever limping round here?" he made no reply, and went off seized with a vague fear of the unknown, with the fear of a poor wretch who was confusedly afraid of a thousand things—of strange faces, of insults, of the suspicious looks of people who did not know him, and of the gendarmes, who went two by two along the roads, making him dive by instinct into the thickets or behind the piles of pounded stones.

When he saw their uniforms at a distance, glittering in the sun, he suddenly discovered marvellous agility, the agility of a monster who tries to gain some hiding-place. He dropped from his crutches, let himself fall as a rag falls, rolled himself into a ball, and became quite small, invisible, as close to the ground as a hare in her form, confounding his brown tatters with the earth.

He had, however, never had any trouble with the gendarmes. And yet he carried this in his blood, as though he had inherited this terror and this trick from his parents, whom he had never known.

He had no place of refuge, no roof of his own, no covering, no shelter. He slept anywhere in summer, and in winter he slipped under the barns or into the stables with remarkable address. He always stole out early in the morning before he should be perceived. He knew all the holes by which buildings could be entered. And the use of his crutches having given his arms ex-

traordinary strength, he sometimes climbed by sheer force of his wrists up into the hay-lofts, where he would remain four or five days without moving, provided in going his round he had secured food enough to keep him alive.

In the midst of men, he lived like the beasts of the wood, knowing no one, loving no one, exciting only among the peasants a sort of indifferent disdain and resigned hostility. They nicknamed him "The Bell," because indeed he did swing between his two stakes of wood like a bell between its supports.

For two days he had eaten nothing. They no longer gave him anything at all. They meant to be rid of him at last. The peasant wives, on their door-steps, cried afar off, on seeing him coming:

"Will you begone, you rascal! I gave you a piece of bread only three days ago!"

And he pivoted upon his props, and took himself off to the next house, where they received him after the same fashion.

From one door to the other the women declared:

"All very well, but we can't feed this sluggard all the year round."

And yet every day the sluggard had need to eat.

He had gone the round in Saint Hilaire, Yarville, and Les Billettes without getting a centime or an old crust. His last hope was at Tournolles; but he must go two leagues on the high-road, and he felt himself too exhausted to drag himself farther, having a stomach as empty as his pocket.

Nevertheless, he set himself to walking.

It was in December. A cold wind ran on the fields and whistled through the bare branches. And the clouds galloped across the low and sombre sky, hastening one knows not whither. The cripple went slowly, lifting his supports from their place one after the other with a painful effort, wedging himself up on his one remaining twisted leg, which was terminated by a club-foot shod with a clout.

From time to time he sat down on the edge of the ditch and rested several minutes. Hunger threw a confused and heavy distress into his soul. He had only one thought: "to eat," but how he did not know.

For three hours he toiled over the long road; then, when he perceived the trees of the village, he hastened his steps.

The first peasant whom he met, and of whom he asked alms, replied to him:

"So here you are again, you old rogue! Sha'n't we ever be rid of you?"

And "The Bell" went on. From door to door they used him roughly, they sent him away without giving him anything. He continued his round, notwithstanding, patient and obstinate. He did not receive a sou.

Then he visited the farm-houses, reeling over the ground soft with rain, so weak that he could hardly lift his sticks. Everywhere they hunted him off. It was one of those cold, sad days when hearts are shut, when minds grow angry, when the soul is sombre, when the hand does not open to succor or to give.

When he had made the tour of all the houses which he knew, he went and threw himself down in the corner of a dry ditch beside the farm-yard of Maitre Chiquet. He "unhooked" himself, as people said, to express the manner in which he let himself fall from his high crutches, making them slip from under his arms. And he remained for a long time motionless, tortured by hunger, but too much of an animal to really penetrate the depths of his unfathomable misery.

He awaited, he knew not what, with that vague sense of expectation which ever persists within us. He waited in the corner of that farm-yard under the icy wind, for the mysterious help which we always hope from the sky or from men, without asking ourselves how or why, or through

whom it is to come. A flock of black chickens passed by, searching their subsistence in the earth, the nourisher of all. At every instant, with one stroke of the beak, they picked up a grain or an invisible insect, then continued their slow and steady search.

“The Bell” regarded them without thinking of anything at all; then, rather in his stomach than in his brain, there came to him a feeling rather than an idea that one of these creatures broiled over a fire of dead wood would be good to eat.

The suspicion that he was about to commit a theft did not occur to him. He took a stone which lay within reach of his hand, and being adroit, he threw it and fairly killed the chicken which was nearest by. The creature fell upon its side, moving its wings. The others fled away, balanced upon their slender feet. And “The Bell,” climbing his crutches once more, set off to pick up his game with movements like those of the chickens.

Just as he arrived beside the little black body stained with blood about its head, he received a terrible blow in the back which made him drop his sticks and sent him rolling ten paces before them. And Maître Chiquet, in a rage, precipitating himself upon the marauder, thrashed him soundly, pounding with fist and knee all over the body of the defenceless cripple, like a madman, or like a peasant who has been robbed.

The farm servants arrived in their turn, and, with their master, fell to beating the beggar. Then, when they were tired, they picked him up and carried him off, and shut him up in the wood-house while they went to fetch the gendarmes.

“The Bell,” half-dead, bleeding, and torn with hunger, remained lying on the ground. Evening came, then night, then daybreak. All this time he had eaten nothing.

Towards mid-day the gendarmes appeared and opened the door with great precaution, expecting a resistance, since Maître Chiquet made out that he had been attacked by the beggar, and had only defended himself with the greatest difficulty.

The corporal cried:

“Come, get up!”

But “The Bell” could no longer move; he tried; indeed, to hoist himself upon his sticks, but he did not succeed. They thought it was a feint, a trick, or the ugly temper of a malefactor, and the two armed men, seizing him roughly, planted him by force upon his crutches.

Fear had taken hold of him, the fear which the game has before the hunter, which the mouse has in presence of the cat. By superhuman efforts he managed to remain upright.

“Forward!” said the corporal. He walked. All the people of the farm were there to see him off. The women shook their fists; the men jeered and insulted him: he was caught at last! a good riddance.

He departed between his two guardians. He found enough energy of desperation to drag himself along till evening. He was brutalized, not even knowing what was happening to him, too much frightened to understand.

The people whom they met stopped to see him go by, and the peasants murmured:

“It is some robber!”

They arrived, towards night, at the capital of the district. He had never come as far as that. He did not even figure to himself what was going on, nor what might be about to happen. All these terrible and unexpected things, these shapes of unknown people, and these strange houses, struck him with consternation.

He did not utter a word, having nothing to say, for he no longer understood anything. Moreover, since for so many years he had conversed with no one, he had almost lost the use of his tongue; and his thoughts also were too confused to formulate themselves in speech.

They shut him up in the town jail. The gendarmes did not think of his needing food, and they left him till the next day.

But when they came to examine him, early in the morning, they found him dead, upon the ground. What a surprise!