

The Beggars

By Lord Dunsany

I was walking down Piccadilly not long ago, thinking of nursery rhymes and regretting old romance.

As I saw the shopkeepers walk by in their black frock-coats and their black hats, I thought of the old line in nursery annals: "The merchants of London, they wear scarlet."

The streets were all so unromantic, dreary. Nothing could be done for them, I thought—nothing. And then my thoughts were interrupted by barking dogs. Every dog in the street seemed to be barking—every kind of dog, not only the little ones but the big ones too. They were all facing East towards the way I was coming by. Then I turned round to look and had this vision, in Piccadilly, on the opposite side to the houses just after you pass the cab-rank.

Tall bent men were coming down the street arrayed in marvelous cloaks. All were sallow of skin and swarthy of hair, and most of them wore strange beards. They were coming slowly, and they walked with staves, and their hands were out for alms.

All the beggars had come to town.

I would have given them a gold doubloon engraved with the towers of Castile, but I had no such coin. They did not seem the people to who it were fitting to offer the same coin as one tendered for the use of a taxicab (O marvelous, ill-made word, surely the password somewhere of some evil order). Some of them wore purple cloaks with wide green borders, and the border of green was a narrow strip with some, and some wore cloaks of old and faded red, and some wore violet cloaks, and none wore black. And they begged gracefully, as gods might beg for souls.

I stood by a lamp-post, and they came up to it, and one addressed it, calling the lamp-post brother, and said, "O lamp-post, our brother of the dark, are there many wrecks by thee in the tides of night? Sleep not, brother, sleep not. There were many wrecks an it were not for thee."

It was strange: I had not thought of the majesty of the street lamp and his long watching over drifting men. But he was not beneath the notice of these cloaked strangers.

And then one murmured to the street: "Art thou weary, street? Yet a little longer they shall go up and down, and keep thee clad with tar and wooden bricks. Be patient, street. In a while the earthquake cometh."

"Who are you?" people said. "And where do you come from?"

"Who may tell what we are," they answered, "or whence we come?"

And one turned towards the smoke-stained houses, saying, "Blessed be the houses, because men dream therein."

Then I perceived, what I had never thought, that all these staring houses were not alike, but different one from another, because they held different dreams.

And another turned to a tree that stood by the Green Park railings, saying, "Take comfort, tree, for the fields shall come again."

And all the while the ugly smoke went upwards, the smoke that has stifled Romance and blackened the birds. This, I thought, they can neither praise nor bless. And when they saw it they raised their hands towards it, towards the thousand chimneys, saying, "Behold

the smoke. The old coal-forests that have lain so long in the dark, and so long still, are dancing now and going back to the sun. Forget not Earth, O our brother, and we wish thee joy of the sun.”

It had rained, and a cheerless stream dropped down a dirty gutter. It had come from heaps of refuse, foul and forgotten; it had gathered upon its way things that were derelict, and went to somber drains unknown to man or the sun. It was this sullen stream as much as all other causes that had made me say in my heart that the town was vile, that Beauty was dead in it, and Romance fled.

Even this thing they blessed. And one that wore a purple cloak with broad green border, said, “Brother, be hopeful yet, for thou shalt surely come at last to the delectable Sea, and meet the heaving, huge, and travelled ships, and rejoice by isles that know the golden sun.” Even thus they blessed the gutter, and I felt no whim to mock.

And the people that went by, in their black unseemly coats and their misshapen, monstrous, shiny hats, the beggars also blessed. And one of them said to one of these dark citizens: “O twin of Night himself, with thy specks of white at wrist and neck like to Night’s scattered stars. How fearfully thou dost veil with black thy hid, unguessed desires. They are deep thoughts in thee that they will not frolic with colour, that they say ‘No’ to purple, and to lovely green ‘Begone.’ Thou hast wild fancies that they must needs be tamed with black, and terrible imaginings that they must be hidden thus. Has thy soul dreams of the angels, and of the walls of faëry that thou hast guarded it so utterly, lest it dazzle astonished eyes? Even so God hid the diamond deep down in miles of clay.

“The wonder of thee is not marred by mirth.

“Behold thou art very secret.

“Be wonderful. Be full of mystery.”

Silently the man in the black frock-coat passed on. And I came to understand when the purple beggar had spoken, that the dark citizen had trafficked perhaps with Ind, that in his heart were strange and dumb ambitions; that his dumbness was founded by solemn rite on the roots of ancient tradition; that it might be overcome one day by a cheer in the street or by some one singing a song, and that when this shopman spoke there might come clefts in the world and people peering over at the abyss.

Then turning towards Green Park, where as yet Spring was not, the beggars stretched out their hands, and looking at the frozen grass and the yet unbudding trees they, chanting all together, prophesied daffodils.

A motor omnibus came down the street, nearly running over some of the dogs that were barking ferociously still. It was sounding its horn noisily.

And the vision went then.