

The Beggar And The King

By Winthrop Parkhurst

CHARACTERS

THE KING OF A GREAT COUNTRY

HIS SERVANT

A BEGGAR

A chamber in the palace overlooks a courtyard. The season is midsummer. The windows of the palace are open, and from a distance there comes the sound of a man's voice crying for bread. THE KING sits in a golden chair. A golden crown is on his head, and he holds in his hand a sceptre which is also of gold. A SERVANT stands by his side, fanning him with an enormous fan of peacock feathers.

THE BEGGAR (*outside*). Bread. Bread. Bread. Give me some bread.

THE KING (*languidly*). Who is that crying in the street for bread?

THE SERVANT (*fanning*). O king, it is a beggar.

THE KING. Why does he cry for bread?

THE SERVANT. O king, he cries for bread in order that he may fill his belly.

THE KING. I do not like the sound of his voice. It annoys me very much. Send him away.

THE SERVANT (*bowing*). O king, he *has* been sent away.

THE KING. If that is so, then why do I hear his voice?

THE SERVANT. O king, he has been sent away many times, yet each time that he is sent away he returns again, crying louder than he did before.

THE KING. He is very unwise to annoy me on such a warm day. He must be punished for his impudence. Use the lash on him.

THE SERVANT. O king, it has been done.

THE KING. Then bring out the spears.

THE SEBVANT. O king, the guards have already bloodied their swords many times driving him away from the palace gates. But it is of no avail.

THE KING. Then bind him and gag him if necessary. If need be cut out his tongue. I do not like the sound of the fellow's voice. It annoys me very much.

THE SERVANT. O king, thy orders were obeyed even yesterday.

THE KING (*frowning*). No. That cannot be. A beggar cannot cry for bread who has no tongue.

THE SERVANT. Behold he can--if he has grown another.

THE KING. What! Why, men are not given more than one tongue in a lifetime. To have more than one tongue is treason.

THE SERVANT. If it is treason to have more than one tongue, O king, then is this beggar surely guilty of treason.

THE KING (*pompously*). The punishment for treason is death. See to it that the fellow is slain. And do not fan me so languidly. I am very warm.

THE SERVANT (*fanning more rapidly*). Behold, O great and illustrious king, all thy commands were obeyed even yesterday.

THE KING. How! Do not jest with thy king.

THE SERVANT. If I jest, then there is truth in a jest. Even yesterday, O king, as I have told thee, the beggar which thou now hearest crying aloud in the street was slain by thy soldiers with a sword.

THE KING. Do ghosts eat bread? Forsooth, men who have been slain with a sword do not go about in the streets crying for a piece of bread.

THE SERVANT. Forsooth, they do if they are fashioned as this beggar.

THE KING. Why, he is but a man. Surely he cannot have more than one life in a lifetime.

THE SERVANT. Listen to a tale, O king, which happened yesterday.

THE KING. I am listening.

THE SERVANT. Thy soldiers smote this beggar for crying aloud in the streets for bread, but his wounds are already healed. They cut out his tongue, but he immediately grew another. They slew him, yet he is now alive.

THE KING. Ah! that is a tale which I cannot understand at all.

THE SERVANT. O king, it may be well.

THE KING. I cannot understand what thou sayest, either.

THE SERVANT. O king, that may be well also.

THE KING. Thou art speaking now in riddles. I do not like riddles. They confuse my brain.

THE SERVANT. Behold, O king, if I speak in riddles it is because a riddle has come to pass.

(THE BEGGAR'S voice suddenly cries out loudly.)

THE BEGGAR (*outside*). Bread. Bread. Give me some bread.

THE KING. Ah! He is crying out again. His voice seems to me louder than it was before.

THE SERVANT. Hunger is as food to the lungs, O king.

THE KING. His lungs I will wager are well fed. Ha, ha!

THE SERVANT. But alas! his stomach is quite empty.

THE KING. That is not my business.

THE SERVANT. Should I not perhaps fling him a crust from the window?

THE KING. No! To feed a beggar is always foolish. Every crumb that is given to a beggar is an evil seed from which springs another fellow like him.

THE BEGGAR (*outside*). Bread. Bread. Give me some bread.

THE SERVANT. He seems very hungry, O king.

THE KING. Yes. So I should judge.

THE SERVANT. If thou wilt not let me fling, him a piece of bread thine ears must pay the debts of thy hand.

THE KING. A king can have no debts.

THE SERVANT. That is true, O king. Even so, the noise of this fellow's begging must annoy thee greatly.

THE KING. It does.

THE SERVANT. Doubtless he craves only a small crust from thy table and he would be content.

THE KING. Yea, doubtless he craves only to be a king and he would be very happy indeed.

THE SERVANT. Do not be hard, O king. Thou art ever wise and just. This fellow is exceedingly hungry. Dost thou not command me to fling him just one small crust from the window?

THE KING. My commands I have already given thee. See that the beggar is driven away.

THE SERVANT. But alas! O king, if he is driven away he will return again even as he did before.

THE KING. Then see to it that he is slain. I cannot be annoyed with the sound of his voice.

THE SERVANT. But alas! O great and illustrious king, if he is slain he will come to life again even as he did before.

THE KING. Ah! that is true. But his voice troubles me. I do not like to hear it.

THE SERVANT. His lungs are fattened with hunger. Of a truth they are quite strong.

THE KING. Well, propose a remedy to weaken them.

THE SERVANT. A remedy, O king?

(He stops fanning.)

THE KING. That is what I said. A remedy--and do not stop fanning me. I am exceedingly warm.

THE SERVANT *(fanning vigorously)*. A crust of bread, O king, dropped from yonder window--forsooth that might prove a remedy.

THE KING *(angrily)*. I have said I will not give him a crust of bread. If I gave him a crust to-day he would be just as hungry again to-morrow, and my troubles would be as great as before.

THE SERVANT. That is true, O king. Thy mind is surely filled with great learning.

THE KING. Therefore, some other remedy must be found.

THE SERVANT. O king, the words of thy illustrious mouth are as very meat-balls of wisdom.

THE KING (*musings*). Now let me consider. Thou sayest he does not suffer pain--

THE SERVANT. Therefore he cannot be tortured.

THE KING. And he will not die--

THE SERVANT. Therefore it is useless to kill him.

THE KING. Now let me consider. I must think of some other way.

THE SERVANT. Perhaps a small crust of bread, O king--

THE KING. Ha! I have it. I have it. I myself will order him to stop.

THE SERVANT (*horrified*). O king!

THE KING. Send the beggar here.

THE SERVANT. O king!

THE KING. Ha! I rather fancy the fellow will stop his noise when the king commands him to. Ha, ha, ha!

THE SERVANT. O king, thou wilt not have a beggar brought into thy royal chamber!

THE KING (*pleased with his idea*). Yea. Go outside and tell this fellow that the king desires his presence.

THE SERVANT. O great and illustrious king, thou wilt surely not do this thing. Thou wilt surely not soil thy royal eyes by looking on such a filthy creature. Thou wilt surely not contaminate thy lips by speaking to a common beggar who cries aloud in the streets for bread.

THE KING. My ears have been soiled too much already. Therefore go now and do as I have commanded thee.

THE SERVANT. O great and illustrious king, thou wilt surely not--

THE KING (*roaring at him*). I said, Go! (THE SERVANT, *abashed, goes out.*) Forsooth, I fancy the fellow will stop his bawling when I order him to. Forsooth, I fancy he will be pretty well frightened when he hears that the king desires his presence. Ha, ha, ha, ha!

THE SERVANT (*returning*). O king, here is the beggar.

(*A shambling creature hung in filthy rags follows THE SERVANT slowly into the royal chamber.*)

THE KING. Ha! A magnificent sight, to be sure. Art thou the beggar who has been crying aloud in the streets for bread?

THE BEGGAR (in a faint voice, after a slight pause). Art thou the king?

THE KING. I am the king.

THE SERVANT (*aside to THE BEGGAR*). It is not proper for a beggar to ask a question of a king. Speak only as thou art spoken to.

THE KING (*to THE SERVANT*). Do thou likewise. (To THE BEGGAR) I have ordered thee here to speak to thee concerning a very grave matter. Thou art the beggar, I understand, who often cries aloud in the streets for bread. Now, the complaint of thy voice annoys me greatly. Therefore, do not beg any more.

THE BEGGAR (*faintly*). I--I do not understand.

THE KING. I said, do not beg any more.

THE BEGGAR. I--I do not understand.

THE SERVANT (*aside to THE BEGGAR*). The king has commanded thee not to beg for bread any more. The noise of thy voice is as garbage in his ears.

THE KING (*to THE SERVANT*). Ha! An excellent flower of speech. Pin it in thy buttonhole. (*To THE BEGGAR*) Thine ears, I see, are in need of a bath even more than thy body. I said, *Do not beg any more*.

THE BEGGAR. I--I do not understand.

THE KING (making a trumpet of his hands and shouting). *DO NOT BEG ANY MORE*.

THE BEGGAR. I--I do not understand.

THE KING. Heavens! He is deafer than a stone wall.

THE SERVANT. O king, he cannot be deaf, for he understood me quite easily when I spoke to him in the street.

THE KING (*to THE BEGGAR*). Art thou deaf? Canst thou hear what I am saying to thee now?

THE BEGGAR. Alas! I can hear every word perfectly.

THE KING. Fft! The impudence. Thy tongue shall be cut out for this.

THE SERVANT. O king, to cut out his tongue is useless, for he will grow another.

THE KING. No matter. It shall be cut out anyway. (*To THE BEGGAR*) I have ordered thee not to beg any more in the streets. What meanest thou by saying thou dost not understand?

THE BEGGAR. The words of thy mouth I can hear perfectly. But their noise is only a foolish tinkling in my ears.

THE KING. Fft! Only a--! A lash will tinkle thy hide for thee if thou dost not cure thy tongue of impudence. I, thy king, have ordered thee not to beg any more in the streets for bread. Signify, therefore, that

thou wilt obey the orders of thy king by quickly touching thy forehead thrice to the floor.

THE BEGGAR. That is impossible.

THE SERVANT (*aside to THE BEGGAR*). Come. It is not safe to tempt the patience of the king too long. His patience is truly great, but he loses it most wondrous quickly.

THE KING. Come, now: I have ordered thee to touch thy forehead to the floor.

THE SERVANT (*nudging him*). And quickly.

THE BEGGAR. Wherefore should I touch my forehead to the floor?

THE KING. In order to seal thy promise to thy king.

THE BEGGAR. But I have made no promise. Neither have I any king.

THE KING. Ho! He has made no promise. Neither has he any king. Ha, ha, ha. I have commanded thee not to beg any more, for the sound of thy voice is grievous unto my ears. Touch thy forehead now to the floor, as I have commanded thee, and thou shall go from this palace a free man. Refuse, and thou wilt be sorry before an hour that thy father ever came within twenty paces of thy mother.

THE BEGGAR. I have ever lamented that he did. For to be born into this world a beggar is a more unhappy thing than any that I know-- unless it is to be born a king.

THE KING. Fft! Thy tongue of a truth is too lively for thy health. Come, now, touch thy forehead thrice to the floor and promise solemnly that thou wilt never beg in the streets again. And hurry!

THE SERVANT (*aside*). It is wise to do as thy king commands thee. His patience is near an end.

THE KING. Do not be afraid to soil the floor with thy forehead. I will graciously forgive thee for that.

(THE BEGGAR *stands motionless.*)

THE SERVANT. I said, it is not wise to keep the king waiting.

(THE BEGGAR *does not move.*)

THE KING. Well? (*A pause.*) *Well?* (*In a rage*) **WELL?**

THE BEGGAR. O king, thou hast commanded me not to beg in the streets for bread, for the noise of my voice offends thee. Now therefore do I likewise command thee to remove thy crown from thy forehead and throw it from yonder window into the street. For when thou hast thrown thy crown into the street, then will I no longer be obliged to beg.

THE KING. Fft! *Thou* commandest *me!* *Thou*, a beggar from the streets, commandest me, a king, to remove my crown from my forehead and throw it from yonder window into the street!

THE BEGGAR. That is what I said.

THE KING. Why, dost thou not know I can have thee slain for such words?

THE BEGGAR. No. Thou canst not have me slain. The spears of thy soldiers are as straws against my body.

THE KING. Ha! We shall see if they are. We shall see!

THE SERVANT. O king, it is indeed true. It is even as he has told thee.

THE BEGGAR. I have required thee to remove thy crown from thy forehead. If so be thou wilt throw it from yonder window into the street, my voice will cease to annoy thee any more. But if thou refuse, then thou wilt wish thou hadst never had any crown at all. For thy

days will be filled with a terrible boding and thy nights will be full of horrors, even as a ship is full of rats.

THE KING. Why, this is insolence. This is treason!

THE BEGGAR. Wilt thou throw thy crown from yonder window?

THE KING. Why, this is high treason!

THE BEGGAR. I ask thee, wilt thou throw thy crown from yonder window?

THE SERVANT (*aside to THE KING*). Perhaps it were wise to humor him, O king. After thou hast thrown thy crown away I can go outside and bring it to thee again.

THE BEGGAR. Well? Well? (He points to the window.) Well?

THE KING. No! I will not throw my crown from that window--no, nor from any other window. What! Shall I obey the orders of a beggar? Never!

THE BEGGAR (*preparing to leave*). Truly, that is spoken like a king. Thou art a king, so thou wouldst prefer to lose thy head than that silly circle of gold that so foolishly sits upon it. But it is well. Thou art a king. Thou couldst not prefer otherwise. (*He walks calmly toward the door.*)

THE KING (*to THE SERVANT*). Stop him! Seize him! Does he think to get off so easily with his impudence!

THE BEGGAR (*coolly*). One of thy servants cannot stop me. Neither can ten thousand of them do me any harm. I am stronger than a mountain. I am stronger than the sea!

THE KING. Ha! We will see about that, we will see about that. (*To THE SERVANT*) Hold him, I say. Call the guards. He shall be put in chains.

THE BEGGAR. My strength is greater than a mountain and my words are more fearful than a hurricane. This servant of thine cannot even touch me. With one breath of my mouth I can blow over this whole palace.

THE KING. Dost thou hear the impudence he is offering me? Why dost thou not seize him? What is the matter with thee? Why dost thou not call the guards?

THE BEGGAR. I will not harm thee now. I will only cry aloud in the streets for bread wherewith to fill my belly. But one day I will not be so kind to thee. On that day my mouth will be filled with a rushing wind and my arms will become as strong as steel rods, and I will blow over this palace, and all the bones in thy foolish body I will snap between my fingers. I will beat upon a large drum and thy head will be my drumstick. I will not do these things now. But one day I will do them. Therefore, when my voice sounds again in thine ears, begging for bread, remember what I have told thee. Remember, O king, and be afraid!

(He walks out. THE SERVANT, struck dumb, stares after him. THE KING sits in his chair, dazed.)

THE KING (*suddenly collecting his wits*). After him! After him! He must not be allowed to escape! After him!

THE SERVANT (*faltering*). O king--I cannot seem to move.

THE KING. Quick, then. Call the guards. He must be caught and put in chains. Quick, I say. Call the guards!

THE SERVANT. O king--I cannot seem to call them.

THE KING. How! Art thou dumb? Ah!

(THE BEGGAR'S *voice is heard outside.*)

THE BEGGAR. Bread. Bread. Give me some bread.

THE KING. Ah. (*He turns toward the window, half-frightened, and then, almost instinctively, raises his hands toward his crown, and seems on the point of tossing it out the window. But with an oath he replaces it and presses it firmly on his head.*) How! Am I afraid of a beggar!

THE BEGGAR (*continuing outside*). Bread. Bread. Give me some bread.

THE KING (*with terrible anger*). Close that window!

(*THE SERVANT stands stupent, and the voice of THE BEGGAR grows louder as the curtain falls.*)