

THE BEGGAR'S HUNT By W. H. DAVIES

WE have no mind to reach that Pole
Where monarchs keep their icy courts ;
Where lords and ladies, proud and cold,
May do no more than smile at sports ;
Nay, laughing, lying at our ease,
We keep our court beneath green trees.

Kings' beds are soft and silvery white,
But ours are golden straw or hay ;
So let kings lie while gentle sleep
Attends our harder beds, when they
Inside their soft, white bedclothes yell
That nightmares ride them down to hell.

Poor lords and ladies, what tame sport
To hunt a fox or stag, while we
Sit on a green bank in the sun,
And chase for hours a faster flea ;
Which blesses us from day to day,
With all our faculties in play.

I had been resting for a little time and, as I was about to continue my journey, I looked back and saw a man in the distance, coming towards me. Seeing that he was going my way, I settled down again, to wait for him, watching his movements as he came along. I noticed at once that he was walking at a fast pace, but what surprised me was that he often came to a halt and made his hands feel various parts of his clothes. My first impression was that he had lost something and was searching for it. I saw him halt quite a number of times and make these quick movements, feeling down both his legs, then in his bosom, and sometimes up both his sleeves. "The poor fellow is in a terrible state of worry," thought I ; "perhaps he has lost silver, or even gold, which has been his savings. Such a loss would be almost madness to a poor looking

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man like that." However, these thoughts did not last long, for I soon came to the conclusion that the man was scratching himself, owing to the attack of fleas.

When he reached my side, I saw at once that he was inclined to pass on without saying a word, but I brought him to a halt by inquiring his destination for the day. He did not answer for some time, for he had put his hand down the back of his neck to scratch his shoulder blade, and this action choked his utterance. As soon as he was able to speak he answered that he was on his way to Hungerford. "Let us walk together for a little way," I said, "for I am going there too. But I am not able to walk very fast." Saying this I gave him twopence, knowing that he would be in no hurry after that, as he would hope for further kindness before we parted for good. To encourage him in this belief, I offered him tobacco, at the same time saying—"I shall be glad when we come to an inn." He began to scratch more than ever now, as much from delight as from fleas.

"Are you out of work?" I asked, as we went along. "I am," he answered; "there is no work to be had anywhere. Curse it." Saying this he began to scratch his left shoulder, and I knew at once that it was a flea, and not the lack of work, that was the object of his curse. "Have you been out of work long?" I inquired. "Two months," he answered; "and I never expect to be in work again. Curse it!" This time he began to scratch his left thigh, and I again came to the conclusion that a flea, and not the lack of work, was the reason why he swore. Of course, I could see plainly that this man was a tramp of a very long standing, who did not trouble his head about work, but would not let me know the truth.

We went on like this for about half a mile, talking of the difficulties of a man out of work, which my ragged companion said were "heart-breaking." "Yes," he said, coming to a halt, and beginning to scratch under his right arm—"Yes, this kind of life is heart-breaking. Curse it!"

At last I saw a signboard not far away, and knew it was an inn.

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But by this time I began to have my doubts as to the wisdom of having this man's company, even in the very lowest kind of a tavern ; where the landlord or his customers would be certain to object to his company. However, I did not like to let him go without first giving him a glass of beer. So I came to a halt and said, " We will go into this inn, but while we are there, can you stop scratching ? " " Of course I can," he answered readily, as though nothing in the world was easier. " You must understand," I continued, " that the landlord, or his wife, or his daughter, whichever serves us, would not care to have a customer that kept on scratching himself. So, drink and laugh, but, for God's sake, don't scratch ! " When my ragged companion heard this he laughed heartily and began to scratch himself all over. When I saw his delight, I could not help laughing as heartily myself. However, after his glee was over, I said kindly, so as not to hurt his feelings, " You'll try not to scratch, won't you ? " When I had done speaking, my companion, who had been motionless for quite half a minute, said in slow, distinct tones—" If I *say* I won't scratch, I *won't* scratch. And if I do, may the devil pickle and purge me ! "

With this understanding we made our way towards the inn. But we had scarcely gone ten steps when my companion waved his hand with a wide sweep, saying—" This is a beautiful county ! " When I heard this, I at once had a suspicion that something was wrong. So, although I looked away from him for a moment, I turned quickly in his direction and was just in time to catch him in the act of scratching his right leg. Seeing this I made up my mind to enter the inn alone. So I took threepence out of my pocket and said—" Do what you like now, for I shall probably be at this inn for a couple of hours. Good-bye." " Thank you," he answered, grasping my hand, " you're a true gentleman. Good-bye and good luck." Saying this he went off with all speed.

When I entered the inn, which was called the Waggon and Horses, I saw my late companion sitting in the taproom, with a glass of beer in his hand. Whether the landlady had been civil to

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him or not, I cannot say, but it was most certain that when I entered she cast several cold glances at her other customer. However, the latter appeared to take little heed of this, and sat with his two arms leaning on the table. It must not be inferred from this attitude that he was not scratching. There he sat, his arms motionless, it is true, but what about his feet ? If the landlady, who had now retired, could have seen those feet, as they were seen by me, she would have ordered him out of her house at once. For there he sat, resting on one leg at a time, while the foot of the other leg was kept busy scratching. But this secret method was not satisfying for long, for in a few moments he gave his feet a rest and set his hands to work on the upper parts of his body. After doing this for a short time, he suddenly got up, finished his beer and ran headlong out of the house.

After having had some bread and cheese and pickles, some beer, and a rest of half an hour, I left the Waggon and Horses and continued my journey towards Hungerford. But I had not been walking more than twenty minutes when I heard a voice hail me from behind a steep bank. When I looked, I saw my late companion. " Wait a minute," he cried, " for I am now ready to travel." " Have you been sleeping ? " I asked, when he had reached my side. " No," he answered with a laugh, " I have been having a lively time at hunting and killing fleas. I shall sleep well after this excitement."

As we walked along he talked of nothing but hunting and killing fleas, saying that hunting hares, foxes or stags was but poor sport compared with that. The subject seemed to interest him so much that he could not change to another and was still at it when we were within a short distance of Hungerford.