

From England

COMMENTS ON BEGGING

Comments are enclosed on the etymology of the word 'beggar' together with two contrasting essays on the topic. Begging is a worldwide phenomenon which sometimes raises strong feelings. It can lead to imprisonment.

Etymology

A beggar is one who begs, particularly one who gains his living by asking charitable contributions of others. The word with the verbal form 'to beg', in Middle English *beggen*, is of obscure history. The words appear first in English in the 13th century, and were easily connected with 'bag', with reference to the receptacle for alms carried by the beggars. The most probable derivation of the word, and that now generally accepted, is that it is a corruption of the name of the lay communities known as Beguines and Beghards, which shortly after their establishment, followed the friars in the practice of mendicancy. It has been suggested, however, that the origin of 'beg' and 'beggars' is to be found in a rare Old English word, *bedacian*, of the same meaning, which is apparently connected with the Gothic (*c.f.* German *bettelen*); but between the occurrence of *bedacian* at the end of the 9th century and the appearance of 'beggar' and 'beg' in the 13th, there is a blank, and no explanation can be given for the great change in form.

GIVE AND ASK NO QUESTIONS

by Roy Hattersley

Most of what needs to be said about beggars was set out by Charles Lamb in one of his Essays of Elia. In the 180 years since their

publication, the consciously literary style in which Lamb rejoiced has gone out of fashion.

So apart from his *Dissertation upon a Roast Pig* — a fantasy about the discovery that meat is more enjoyable cooked than raw — most of what he wrote has been forgotten. That is a great pity. For it is as true today as it was in 1820 that ‘half of those stories about prodigious fortunes made by beggars are ... misers’ calumnies.’

Admittedly, that warm-hearted and well-founded judgement does not apply to Leonard Hockey, the Manchester mendicant who was recently threatened with prison if he continued to beg in and about the city’s car parks.

It seems that Mr. Hockey was earning something in excess of £20,000 a year and that most of it was used for what newspapers described as ‘feeding the drug habit’. Much anger has been aroused by the thought that he paid no tax.

Opinions will differ as to whether or not the courts did Mr. Hockey — as distinct from the importuned Mancunians — a favour by deterring him from defiling the ‘pleasant and welcoming environment of the city centre.’

But it would be a pity if the Manchester ruling were (in the words of Mr. Hockey’s solicitor) to ‘open the flood gates’ to a tidal wave of self-righteous respectability that washes beggars from the streets of Britain. As Lamb makes plain beggars are good for us.

Of course, it would be better for all concerned if the whole country lived in houses with central heating and well stocked fridges. But that is not going to happen. Circumstances and psychology will always force a percentage of the population on to the streets. The decision society must take is not how to eliminate the beggars, but how to deal with them.

Lamb offers the answer. ‘When a poor creature (outwardly and visibly such) comes before thee, do not stay to enquire whether the seven small children in whose name he implores the assistance have a veritable existence. Rake not into the bowels of unwelcome truth to save a halfpenny. It is good to believe him.’

The way in which we treat beggars is a test of our character. By any standard, they are a nuisance. Not only do they ask us for money, their existence makes us feel uneasy. However, we respond to their pleas, we always feel we have done the wrong thing.

If we give a beggar a pound, we feel gullible and resentful at our inability to offer, instead, some improving advice about getting a proper job. If like the Pharisee, we pass by on the other side of the street, we think of the starving children in the freezing garret who, thanks to us, will have no milk to drink tonight.

Faced with those disturbing alternatives, it is surely better to accept Mr. Lamb's advice and, not being frightened 'at the hard words, imposition and imposture,' give and ask no questions.

When I read that Mr. Hockey was collecting something like £400 a week, I thought at once of a lady — central European in dress and, I suspect, more youthful than her worn-out appearance suggests — who spends her days under a theatre awning on the other side of the road from my office.

My suspicions about her age were raised when she began to bring a child, whom I suppose to be her son — a view reinforced by the fact that, although he looked eight or none, she suckled him for most of the day.

If someone would convince me that the woman outside the theatre has £400 a week to spend — whether it comes from gullible passers-by, social security fraud or the prudent investment of her inheritance — I could get on with my work instead of staring out of the window and wondering what should be done about her.

When I see well-heeled pedestrians — normally on their way to expensive restaurants or the taxi rank — pass her by as if she were invisible, I wonder what should be done about them.

I admit it. The occasional pound — certainly not a sacrifice, for its loss changes nothing — is moral hush money, handed over so that I shall feel less guilty about my self-indulgence.

So I am open to the criticism that I have a vested interest in beggars being left to rot on the streets rather than persuaded or, if necessary, driven into accepting more congenial accommodation.

Perhaps I do. But while they remain, I shall stick to the view that it is better to help ten frauds than ignore one deserving case. Beggars prick my conscience. I experience that feeling too infrequently to support the prohibition of what Lamb called the 'salutary and touching' lesson to passers-by.

Roy Hattersley is a well-known political commentator in England. He originally wrote this essay in The Guardian, which has authorised reproduction. Comment@guardian.co.uk



A COMPLAINT OF THE DECAY OF BEGGARS IN THE METROPOLIS

by Charles Lamb

The all-sweeping besom of societarian reformation — your only modern Alcides' club to rid the time of its abuses — is uplift with many-handed sway to extirpate the last fluttering tatters of the bugbear Mendicity from the metropolis. Scrips, wallets, bags — staves, dogs, and crutches — the whole mendicant fraternity with all their baggage are fast posting out of the purlieu of this eleventh persecution. From the crowded crossing, from the corners of streets and turnings of allies, the parting Genius of Beggary is 'with sighing sent.'

I do not approve of this wholesale going to work, this impertinent crusade, or *bellum ad exterminationem*, proclaimed against a species. Much good might be sucked from these Beggars.

They were the oldest and the honourablest form of pauperism. Their appeals were to our common nature; less revolting to an ingenuous mind than to be a suppliant to the particular humours or caprice of any fellow-creature, or set of fellow-creatures, parochial or societarian. Theirs were the only rates uninvincible in the levy, ungrudged in the assessment.

There was a dignity springing from the very depth of their desolation; as to be naked is to be so much nearer to the being a man, than to go in livery.

The greatest spirits have felt this in their reverses; and when Dionysius from king turned schoolmaster, do we feel any thing towards him but contempt? Could Van Dyke have made a picture of him, swaying a ferula for a sceptre, which would have affected our minds with the same heroic pity, the same compassionate admiration, with which we regard his Belisarius begging for an obolus? Would the moral have been more graceful, more pathetic?

The Blind Beggar in the legend — the father of pretty Bessy — whose story doggrel rhymes and ale-house signs cannot so degrade nor attenuate, but that some sparks of a lustrous spirit will shine through the disguisements — this noble Earl of Cornwall (as indeed he was) and memorable sport of fortune, fleeing from the unjust sentence of his liege lord, stript of all, and seated on the flowering green of Bethnal, with his more fresh and springing daughter by his side, illumining his rags and his beggary — would the child and parent have cut a better figure, doing the honours of a counter, or expiating their fallen condition upon the three-foot eminence of some sempstering shop-board?

In tale or history your Beggar is ever the just antipode to your King. The poets and romancical writers (as dear Margaret Newcastle would call them) when they would most sharply and feelingly paint a reverse of fortune, never stop till they have brought down their hero in good earnest to rags and the wallet. The depth of the descent illustrates the height he falls from. There is no medium which can be presented to the imagination without offence. There is no breaking the fall. Lear, thrown from his palace, must divest him of his garments, till he answer ‘mere nature;’ and Cresseid, fallen from a prince’s love, must extend her pale arms, pale with other whiteness than of beauty, supplicating lazar alms with bell and clap-dish.

The Lucian wits knew this very well; and, with a converse policy, when they would express scorn of greatness without the pity, they show us an Alexander in the shades cobbling shoes, or a Semiramis getting up foul linen.

How would it sound in song, that a great monarch had declined his affections upon the daughter of a baker! yet do we feel the imagination at all violated when we read the ‘true ballad,’ where King Cophetua woos the beggar maid?

Pauperism, pauper, poor man, are expressions of pity, but pity alloyed with contempt. No one properly has contempt for a beggar. Poverty is a comparative thing, and each degree of it is mocked by its ‘neighbour grice.’ Its poor rents and comings-in are soon summed up and told. Its pretences to property are almost ludicrous. Its pitiful attempts to save excite a smile. Every scornful companion can weigh



"Jostle with him for the wall."

his trifle-bigger purse against it. Poor man reproaches poor man in the streets with impolitic mention of his condition, his own being a shade better, while the rich pass by and jeer at both. No rascally comparative insults a Beggar, or thinks of weighing purses with him. He is not in the scale of comparison. He is not under the measure of property. He confessedly hath none, any more than a dog or a sheep.

No one twitteth him with ostentation above his means. No one accuses him of pride, or upbraideth him with mock humility. None jostle with him for the wall, or pick quarrels for precedency. No wealthy neighbour seeketh to eject him from his tenement. No man sues him. No man goes to law with him. If I were not the independent gentleman that I am, rather than I would be a retainer to the great, a led captain, or a poor relation, I would choose, out of the delicacy and true greatness of my mind, to be a Beggar.

Rags, which are the reproach of poverty, are the Beggar's robes and graceful insignia of his profession, his tenure, his full dress, the suit in which he is expected to show himself in public. He is never out of the fashion, or limpeth awkwardly behind it. He is not required to put on court mourning. He weareth all colours, fearing none. His costume hath undergone less change than the quaker's. He is the only man in the universe who is not obliged to study appearances. The ups and downs of the world concern him no longer. He alone continueth in one stay. The price of stock or land affecteth him not. The fluctuations of agricultural or commercial prosperity touch him not, or at worst but change his customers. He is not expected to become bail or surety for any one. No man troubleth him with questioning his religion or politics. He is the only free man in the universe.

The Mendicants of this great city were so many of her sights, her lions. I can no more spare them, than I could the Cries of London. No corner of a street is complete without them. They are as indispensable as the Ballad Singer; and in their picturesque attire as ornamental as the Signs of old London. They were the standing morals, emblems, mementos, dial-mottos, the spital sermons, the books for children, the salutary checks and pauses to the high and rushing tide of greasy citizenry — Look upon that poor and broken bankrupt there.

Above all, those old blind Tobits that used to line the wall of Lincoln's Inn Garden, before modern fastidiousness had expelled them, casting up their ruined orbs to catch a ray of pity, and (if possible) of light, with their faithful Dog Guide at their feet, — whither are they fled? or into what corners, blind as themselves, have they been driven, out of the wholesome air and sun-warmth? immersed between four walls, in what withering poor-house do they endure the penalty of double darkness, where the chink of the dropt

halfpenny no more consoles their forlorn bereavement, far from the sound of the cheerful and hope-stirring tread of the passenger? Where hang their useless staves? and who will farm their dogs? Have the overseers of St. L — caused them to be shot? or were they tied up in sacks, and dropt into the Thames, at the suggestion of B — , the mild rector of —?

Well fare the soul of unfastidious Vincent Bourne, most classical, and at the same time, most English, of the Latinists — who has treated of this human and quadrupedal alliance, this dog and man friendship, in the sweetest of his poems, the Epitaphium in Canem, or Dog's Epitaph. Reader, peruse it; and say, if customary sights, which could call up such gentle poetry as this, were of a nature to do more harm or good to the moral sense of the passengers through the daily thoroughfares of a vast and busy metropolis.

Pauperis hic iri requiesco Lyciscus, herilis,
Dum vixi, tutela vigil columenque senectae,
Dux caeco fidus: nec, me ducente, solebat,
Praetenso hinc atque hinc baculo, per iniqua locorum
Incertam explorare viam; sed fila secutus,
Quae dubios regerent passus, vestigia tuta
Fixit inoffenso gressu; gelidumque sedile
In nudo nactus saxo, qua praetereuntium
Unda frequens confluit, ibi miserisque tenebras
Lamentis, noctemque oculis ploravit obortam.
Ploravit nec frustra; obolum dedit alter et alter,
Queis corda et mentem indiderat natura benignam.
Ad latus interea jacui sopitus herile,
Vel mediis vigil in somnis; ad herilia jussa
Auresque atque animum arrectus, seu frustula amice
Porrexit sociasque dapes, seu longa diei
Taedia perpressus, reditum sub nocte parabat.
Hi mores, haec vita fuit, dum fata sinebant,
Dum neque languebam morbis, nec inerte senecta;
Quae tandem obrepsit, veterique satellite cascum
Orbavit dominum prisci sed gratia facti
Ne tota intereat, longos deleta per annos,
Exiguum hunc Irus tumulum de cespite fecit,

Etsi inopis, non ingratae, munuscula dextrae;
Carmine signavitque brevi, dominumque canemque
Quod memoret, fidumque canem dominumque benignum.

Poor Irus' faithful wolf-dog here I lie,
That wont to tend my old blind master's steps,
His guide and guard: nor, while my service lasted,
Had he occasion for that staff, with which
He now goes picking out his path in fear
Over the highways and crossings; but would plant,
Safe in the conduct of my friendly string,
A firm foot forward still, till he had reach'd
His poor seat on some stone, nigh where the tide
Of passers by in thickest confluence flow'd:
To whom with loud and passionate laments
From morn to eve his dark estate he wail'd.
Nor wail'd to all in vain: some here and there,
The well-disposed and good, their pennies gave.
I meantime at his feet obsequious slept;
Not all-asleep in sleep, hut heart and ear
Prick'd up at his least motion; to receive
At his kind hand my customary crumbs,
And common portion in his feast of scraps;
Or when night warn'd us homeward, tired and spent
With our long day and tedious beggary.
These were my manners, this my way of life,
Till age and slow disease me overtook,
And sever'd from my sightless master's side.
But lest the grace of so good deeds should die,
Through tract of years in mute oblivion lost,
This slender tomb of turf hath Irus reared,
Cheap monument of no ungrudging hand,
And with short verse inscribed it, to attest,
In long and lasting union to attest,
The virtues of the Beggar and his Dog.

These dim eyes have in vain explored for some months past a well-known figure, or part of the figure, of a man, who used to glide his comely upper half over the pavements of London, wheeling along with

most ingenious celerity upon a machine of wood; a spectacle to natives, to foreigners, and to children. He was of a robust make, with a florid sailor-like complexion, and his head was bare to the storm and sunshine. He was a natural curiosity, a speculation to the scientific, a prodigy to the simple. The infant would stare at the mighty man brought down to his own level. The common cripple would despise his own pusillanimity, viewing the hale stoutness, and hearty heart, of this half-limbed giant. Few but must have noticed him; for the accident, which brought him low, took place during the riots of 1780, and he has been a groundling so long. He seemed earth-born, an Anteus, and to suck in fresh vigour from the soil which he neighboured. He was a grand fragment; as good as an Elgin marble. The nature, which should have recruited his reft legs and thighs, was not lost, but only retired into his upper parts, and he was half a Hercules. I heard a tremendous voice thundering and growling, as before an earthquake, and casting down my eyes, it was this mandrake reviling a steed that had started at his portentous appearance. He seemed to want but his just stature to have rent the offending quadruped in shivers. He was as the man-part of a Centaur, from which the horse-half had been cloven in some dire Lapithan controversy. He moved on, as if he could have made shift with yet half of the body-portion which was left him. The os sublime was not wanting; and he threw out yet a jolly countenance upon the heavens. Forty-and-two years had he driven this out of door trade, and now that his hair is grizzled in the service, but his good spirits no way impaired, because he is not content to exchange his free air and exercise for the restraints of a poor-house, he is expiating his contumacy in one of those houses (ironically christened) of Correction.

Was a daily spectacle like this to be deemed a nuisance, which called for legal interference to remove? or not rather a salutary and a touching object, to the passers-by in a great city? — Among her shows, her museums, and supplies for ever-gaping curiosity (and what else but an accumulation of sights — endless sights — is a great city; or for what else is it desirable?) was there not room for one *Lusus* (not *Naturae*, indeed, but) *Accidentium*? What if in forty-and-two years' going about, the man had scraped together enough to give a portion to his child (as the rumour ran) of a few hundreds — whom had he injured? — whom had he imposed upon? The contributors



had enjoyed their sight for their pennies. What if after being exposed all day to the heats, the rains, and the frosts of heaven — shuffling his ungainly trunk along in an elaborate and painful motion — he was enabled to retire at night to enjoy himself at a club of his fellow cripples over a dish of hot meat and vegetables, as the charge was gravely brought against him by a clergyman deposing before a House of Commons' Committee — was this, or was his truly paternal consideration, which (if a fact) deserved a statue rather than a whipping-post, and is inconsistent at least with the exaggeration of nocturnal orgies which he has been slandered with — a reason that he should be deprived of his chosen, harmless, nay edifying, way of life, and be committed in hoary age for a sturdy vagabond? -

There was a Yorick once, whom it would not have shamed to have sat down at the cripples' feast, and to have thrown in his benediction, ay, and his mite too, for a companionable symbol. 'Age, thou hast lost thy breed.' -

Half of these stories about the prodigious fortunes made by begging are (I verily believe) misers' calumnies. One was much talked of in the public papers some time since, and the usual charitable inferences deduced. A clerk in the Bank was surprised with the announcement of a five hundred pound legacy left him by a person whose name he was a stranger to. It seems that in his daily morning walks from Peckham (or some village thereabouts) where he lived, to his office, it had been his practice for the last twenty years to drop his halfpenny duly into the hat of some blind Bartimeus, that sate begging alms by the way-side in the Borough. The good old beggar recognised his daily benefactor by the voice only; and, when he died, left all the amassings of his alms (that [p 120] had been half a century perhaps in the accumulating) to his old Bank friend. Was this a story to purse up people's hearts, and pennies, against giving an aims to the blind ? — or not rather a beautiful moral of well-directed charity on the one part, and noble gratitude upon the other?

I sometimes wish I had been that Bank clerk.

I seem to remember a poor old grateful kind of creature, blinking, and looking up with his no eyes in the sun —

Is it possible I could have steeled my purse against him?

Perhaps I had no small change.

Reader, do not be frightened at the hard words, imposition, imposture — give, and ask no questions. Cast thy bread upon the waters. Some have unawares (like this Bank clerk) entertained angels.

Shut not thy purse-strings always against painted distress. Act a charity sometimes. When a poor creature (outwardly and visibly such) comes before thee, do not stay to inquire whether the ‘seven small children,’ in whose name he implores thy assistance, have a veritable existence. Rake not into the bowels of unwelcome truth, to save a halfpenny. It is good to believe him. If he be not all that he pretendeth, give, and under a personate father of a family, think (if thou pleasest) that thou hast relieved an indigent bachelor. When they come with their counterfeit looks, and mumping tones, think them players. You pay your money to see a comedian feign these things, which, concerning these poor people, thou canst not certainly tell whether they are feigned or not.



Charles Lamb (1775-1834) was a famous English poet and essayist. Some of his works were published together in Essays of Elia. The above essay first appeared in 'London Magazine' 1822. The drawings were done at the end of the nineteenth century by C.E. Brock.

