

The Beggar

by CosmicRat, 1977

Alexander stood on the corner of Hollywood and Vine, a plethora of pedestrians steadily wandering by him. There were tourists with cameras, shoppers in shorts, young people just being and moving, and old people with their sad, slow shuffles. It was a good intersection for Alexander-- lots of people from all walks of life.

Alexander had patched blue jeans, a torn and faded blue cotton shirt, a pair of sandals, and a nondescript sleepy brown dog on a clothesline leash. And, he had a tin cup. These were his assets, the tools of his trade. An eight-hour workday on a busy corner netted the beggar around twenty dollars on the average. Of course there were good days and bad days. Begging takes the knack of looking at a person with a warm, friendly smile and pleading eyes; of not being too aggressive or demanding, nor too timid to convey the message. Alexander was good at that. He didn't cause the giver to be resentful or scornful. Giving to Alexander was like helping a friend. He even had regular customers.

When he said anything, it was "Hi, buddy, can you spare a dime?" Few people just gave him a dime, but no one likes to be reminded of inflation and asked for a quarter or fifty cents. If a man asks for a dime and you give him a quarter, you feel generous. The other way around, you feel cheap. Alexander knew this. His living depended on it.

Alexander was not old, nor crippled, nor blind. There was nothing wrong with him. Begging was his chosen profession.

This day, on the corner of Hollywood and Vine, was not a good day. It was hot. There was not a trace of a breeze. Smog hung especially heavy, glowing orange with the heat of the sun, hiding the blue of the sky. Sweat soaked Alexander's shirt, and his feet hurt. He found it harder to summon up a smile, and the passers-by mostly failed to summon up some change. Perhaps his dog, who had no name, summed it up best when he raised a leg and pissed on Alexander's ankle.

"Shit!", said Alexander, somewhat inaccurately and to no one in particular. "Five hours out here and only three dollars. If only everyone would give, I could go home and take a shower."

He was not exactly angry at the non-givers, but he felt unrewarded and unloved. "I'd give anything for some generosity right now", he mumbled to himself.

A gentle breeze blew sudden coolness across his sweaty body. Alexander brushed his hair back off his forehead and looked around. Cars kept buzzing by, but the sound of footsteps on the sidewalk around him were curiously absent. "Strange", he thought, "at one in the afternoon." A single cloud blotted the sun, making the breeze feel even cooler. Alexander looked westward up Hollywood Boulevard. As far as he could see there was only one pedestrian, a man in dark clothing, walking east.

He watched the man approach. A block away he could see that the man was wearing black slacks and a black turtle-neck sweater. In one hand, the man was carrying a shapeless black canvas bag. He was walking purposefully, but not hurriedly. Alexander looked around him again and still saw no one. He looked at the people in the passing cars. All of them had their windows up; every person in every car looked straight ahead, neither smiling nor frowning.

He looked back toward the approaching man, who was now only half a block away. "Black turtleneck in this weather?", thought the beggar. Of course, corporate conformists in their penguin suits often disregarded the heat, but this man was different. He looked cool. Alexander, feeling self-conscious

about staring at the only other person on the street, looked down at his dog, who lay limply at his feet, asleep. He looked into his cup at the five nickels on the bottom, left there to rattle. The rest of his meager take was in his pocket.

When he looked up again, the man in black was standing only two feet away, looking back at him. Alexander said the only thing he could think of: "Hi, buddy, can you spare a dime?" The man in black smiled, showing perfect white teeth. His hair was as black as his sweater, and he wore a black leather cap. "I have no money", he said.

"That's ok, said the beggar. "Not many people on the street."

The man in black stood there, still looking at Alexander. "No, there aren't."

Alexander grinned uneasily. "So, how's it going with you?" he asked.

"Perfectly", said the man.

"That's great", said Alexander. "Things aren't so good for me today."

"Perhaps I can help."

"I thought you didn't have any money."

"True, but perhaps we can make a trade." He smiled with those perfect teeth again.

"What?"

The man in black opened the black canvas bag, reached in, and pulled out a tin cup. It was about the size and shape of Alexander's. "My cup for yours."

Alexander looked at him suspiciously. "Can I see it?"

"Certainly." He handed the cup to Alexander. Upon close inspection, the cup appeared to be handmade. It had been painstakingly hammered out of a single piece of dull, dark metal. The handle was a heavy metal ring that seemed to be welded onto the side of the cup. The bottom was imprinted with a symbol, a semi-circle with a dot at its center.

"Why do you want to trade?"

"It will help you get what you want."

Alexander looked at the man, who was still smiling at him. "Well, it couldn't hurt." He picked up his own cup, dumped the five nickels into his palm and pocketed them. He handed his cup to the man. The man said, "Thank you", and dropped the cup into the canvas bag. He turned and walked westward, whence he had come. The beggar watched him recede in the distance. When he could no longer make out the black-clad figure, he became aware that there were people around him again.

The usual crowd of tourists, shoppers, and other walkers, the assorted menagerie of mankind, filed by in their usual abundance. What was not usual was that each and every one of them, without being asked, dropped at least a quarter into Alexander's new cup. Some gave dollar bills. A five or two appeared. People barely gave him time to empty the cup into his pockets. Time after time, the cup was filled to the brim.

Alexander stood open-mouthed, unable to believe what was happening. Begging had never been this easy. "This isn't even begging", he thought. For four more hours Alexander stood at Hollywood and Vine, hypnotized by the steady stream of givers. He might have stood there longer, but all four of his jean pockets were stuffed with coins, a pile of coins was stashed behind his sleeping dog, and his shirt pocket was full of bills. Still stunned by it all, he wrapped the pile of coins in his shirt, woke his dog, and trudged the six blocks home. Even people he met walking home tried to hand him coins. He began to tell them, "Thanks, no more today."

Inside his one-room apartment, Alexander counted his money. It came to a little over a hundred dollars. "Wow", was all he could say to himself. The next day he added to his equipment a small cloth laundry bag. He went to the corner of Sunset and Western and held out his cup. Just like yesterday, every passer-by dropped money into it. Men even gave him quarters on the way to the adult movie

arcade. Alexander lost count of the times he dumped the full cup into the laundry bag. Six hours later he hefted the bag, and he could barely lift it. Straining, he laid it over his shoulder and walked home, the dog with no name trotting silently behind him.

The beggar had made over \$300. He started multiplying that sum by five days a week, then six days. He calculated more hours per day, and fewer hours per day, until his head was swimming with astounding figures. He thought of the price of a car, a motorcycle, a high-rise apartment with a pool and a sauna, a stereo system, a big-screen TV. It could all be affordable. "Wow," he said to himself.

He thought of the strangeness of the cup, and of the stranger in black. He didn't try to explain it to himself. He knew he couldn't. It didn't matter how it happened, anyway. What was important was what was happening.

In a few months, Alexander had saved nearly ten thousand dollars. He didn't buy much; he decided it would be better to save. Perhaps the effect of the cup wouldn't last forever. He felt excited about the money he was getting, but he felt uneasy, too. Something didn't feel right. He thought about it as he stood on the corner of Hollywood and Wilton Place. The day went on. The cup was filled and filled. The bag got heavier. "It's too easy", he said. And he went home.

For seven days he stayed at home. On the seventh day, there was a knock on the door. When Alexander opened it, the man in black smiled, his white teeth gleaming in the dimly lit hallway. "Want to trade back?" he asked.

"Yes", said Alexander.

I was drinking a cup of coffee at the hamburger stand at Sunset and Western when someone sat down near me on the bench. I looked over at him. He was wearing a black turtleneck sweater, black slacks, and a black leather cap. He was smiling, showing perfect white teeth. I said to him, "You certainly look pleased about something."

"I am", he said. And he told me the story I just told you.

Then he said, "All of us are beggars of something. If not money, it may be attention, fame or notoriety, power, or love. Sometimes we feel that we don't get enough. But what happens if we get too much, too easily?"

"Alexander is a wise man", I said. "I don't know if I could have made the same choice."

"What do you do?" asked the man.

"I'm a writer", I said. "Or, at least I'm trying to be."

He opened his black bag and pulled out an old-looking metal fountain pen. He looked at the cheap ballpoint in my pocket, and said, "Want to trade?"

I thought of my ambition, my desire to see my work published, and all that I feel I have to say to the world. I thought, "It could give me a start...then I could trade back."

But, would I trade back, as Alexander had done? Would I have the self-confidence and conviction to go on my own when the time came?

I grinned at him. "No, thanks", I said.