The Heart of a Beggar

Maxim Gorky

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A VAGRANT, a brother of beggars, a vagabond like himself, whom he met at a turn of the country road as night came, said to him, "If you wish to do a neat trick, walk straight forward, go across the bridge and follow the edge of the wood, and on the right you will find a villa that looks like a castle. There is no outer wall, and there is no moat. There is nobody guarding it the gentleman and his family have not yet returned, and the gardener is sick abed. And there is no dog, a little while ago I stroked his snout with this stick. Once in the house you will be highly puzzled to make a choice. If you have a heart in your body," said the vagabond in conclusion, "don't fail to use this opportunity. You can turn the neatest kind of a trick there, sure thing!"

Uttering not a word of comment, Red Fox, as he was known among his fellows, followed this suggestion promptly. After a night spent in the open air of the fields it was in July and the sun was glowing upon the earth with scorching heat he had gone his way at break of day. A fresh breath was caressing the horizon, and a light, transparent blue vapor was rising from the meadows. The expanses where the ears swayed on high stalks seemed to be living carpets, and the river in its sinuous passage through the plain looked like a bright, clear, silvered ribbon.

The Red Fox strode across the bridge and thence to the edge of the wood, where he began to walk hastily along, expecting the villa soon to come into sight. Clad in dull tatters and with noiseless shoes of coarse cloth on his feet, he seemed to glide like a gray shadow through the grass, that was now glistening with patches of liveliest color.

His face was that of a prematurely old man, furrowed and devastated by most bitter privations long suffered. It seemed to have not the faintest expression. Only in his eyes was there a gleam of life. And only the foxy hair of his scalp and his beard seemed to distinguish him from the other beggars who were slinking up and down the country road. For this reason, too, he was known as the Red Fox among his companions in suffering, and among the farmers who sometimes gave him shelter and did not know his name.

The wood lay behind him, and before him, almost a hundred yards from the road, an occasional portion of the villa was visible where the luxuriant bushes of bloom of the great garden−beds were not a delightful screen. The various shapes of its roof covered with slate, the walls of brick trimmed with blocks of stone, its coquettish slim towers and the broad, distinguished stairway of its portico, all these gave to the villa an air of elegant majesty as it stood facing the horizon. They dominated the whole vicinity and seemed to say, "Look at this! All this belongs to us! We are the masters!"

The stroller stood still; but before he made a final, stern resolve, he let himself sink into the grass. A kind of swoon, as it were, was pervading his very soul. It was the first time he found himself engrossed by an intention to steal.

Certainly till the present day he had been wont to commit numberless little sins along the many country roads over which fate had led him. Never, however, had he broken open a door or climbed a wall or taken in any criminal manner the most trivial sum of money. And, indeed, why should he have done such a thing? Did he not feel, after all, that a life of vigor was bounding through his veins, and who could persuade him to believe that he was not happy?

It was sheer accident that had brought together him and the old beggar who had taught him to weave baskets. Having acquired a trade, he wandered from one neighborhood to another, working in summer among willow bushes along charming streams, and in winter beside some hospitable hearth. Wherever he went he found a ready sale for his light baskets. They looked as if they had been woven of the switches of willow of gold.

In the twilight of an evening of spring he had met a woman at a well that was near a village that seemed lost to the rest of the world. She was neither beautiful nor pretty, but she had tender eyes and a smile of humility and resignation. Her face bore the expression that is given only by great suffering. She was an orphan, a poor girl of the country, who had been treated harshly by her employer. The vagabond and this unhappy woman saw and loved each other. He vaunted the freedom there was under the immeasurable skies whose sun shone down so kindly upon the poor. She followed him, and from this day on they wandered together through the moist valleys in which the rushes grew like great scepters.

The years had glided away. As the wanderers felt no concern for time they never gave to it the slightest thought. Then one day came a child. Yes, between these two miserable persons there forced its way a little, still more miserable creature that, in spite of circumstance, soon became so pretty, so rosy, so graceful, so blond, that anyone who saw it would have taken it for a child of wealth who had come to the world in laces. Father and mother were astounded at this unexpected gift from fate, their souls were wondrouslyenthralled by it, and they were filled with admiration. This son became their idol. So that he might feel well and be vigorous, so that he might always have enough to eat, so that he might sleep in most refreshing comfort, they sacrificed themselves eagerly, abandoned themselves to toil by day and by night, suffering, and without a word of complaint.

The child grew larger. It was four years old when its mother suddenly died. "She caught the fever from being near the water so often and so long," a farmer said to the basket−maker. "Take care, I tell you. If he, still so young, lies round in the willow bushes the little fellow will surely come to the same thing."

The father gave no heed to this warning. Now as formerly he led the same life. His tenderness for his departed comrade, this tenderness which as time passed became a jealous, wild passion, he transferred to the child, for the child was the living reminder of the dead woman and the pledge of her love. Yes, it was still more it was the hope, the pride, indeed, of this vagabond, it was his ideal of gentleness and of beauty! Ah, the fine curly hair, the deep, deep eyes, the rosy smile on the little white teeth! How insistently the father loved all this! What a tremor of joy rushed through him when he contemplated all this!

But why had he found so trivial the advice that had been given him, the warning? The child, too, was consumed by fever. In the first weeks of summer it died, precisely as the mother had died. And the vagabond perhaps for the first time in his life cried bitterly.

He cried, but his tears brought him no alleviation. He felt as if the blood had ebbed from his veins, as if everything around him had become hideously black, as if the beats in his bosom had ceased. Ever his eyes were seeking the child. Ever he tried to conjure it up before him in spirit its dear picture its smile its movements. His endeavor was vain, grimly vain. And not a single familiar object of the dead little fellow's group of treasures remained for the father, whose pain became the more persistent and cruel the more he felt the lack of every token of remembrance.

From this day forward this man became bad. A blind hatred rose steadily in his sore heart, and at the same time he was conscious of an impulse to do evil and to destroy.

"Whether apples or gold coins are stolen there is really no difference," a companion of the road had said to him in a whisper one day. Tacitly he had said to himself, "Indeed, yes, and like the others I intend to steal now, too."

The Red Fox, stretched out at his full length in the grass, had just repeated this oath. He rose now, sprang across the shallow ditch near him and soon went striding through the deserted avenues of the park. The nearer he came to it the less shy he felt of the majestic villa. When he began to touch its walls he thought of it with contempt, as a man despises some defenceless creature he intends to torment.

Slowly he crept around the house. On the side where many trees were planted he discovered a glass door that was almost even with the ground. No one saw him. With his knife he destroyed the lock, he broke in a pane, and soon the door yielded. He was now inside.

At first he saw nothing. The lowered venetian blinds kept the room thoroly dark. But slowly, very slowly, his eyes accustomed themselves to the deep twilight. Suddenly he stood still as if transfixed. A refreshing coolness prevailed in the salon he had entered and it seemed to him that he noticed the odor of faded flowers. On the walls between golden arabesques, old paintings were smiling. Glistening oak and lacquer furniture surrounded him. Everywhere were costly and rare objects of vertu in abundance. Never had the beggar seen so many wonders. His astonishment at the sight of all these elegant and frivolous things was most keen. He sought to fathom the purpose of them, and a new fear pregnant with veneration came over him.

Yet he must act! But what of the many things here should he take with him? If some day he should attempt to sell the most trivial of these objects he would betray himself. Suddenly he caught sight of a secretary and opened one of its drawers. Two gold coins, which had been forgotten here, lay gleaming in the shadow. Already he was stretching forth his hand when his glance fell abruptly on a photograph that stood on the blotter before him. Astonished, confused, enraptured, he stood still, his hand in poise. It was the head of a child in a neat frame.

He contemplated the bewitching face, the fine curly hair, the deep, deep eyes, the rosy smile showing the little white teeth. Without a doubt it was the son of the master of the villa. But to the vagabond this picture was that of his own son. He again found the grace of the little beggar and his features in the picture of this rich child that had come to the world in laces. Not for a moment did it occur to him that this was only an accidental resemblance. Only one thing seemed to him certain he possessed not one token of remembrance of the dead child, and this dead child lived again in this picture.

The vagabond made no further delay. He seized the portrait, covered it with kisses, stuck it in the pocket over his heart and fled.

All his hate had disappeared. He had just committed his first theft, and also his last. All other things, of whatever value, gave him no concern, for he now possessed a reminder of his child, on whom he had always showered such hot love from the heart of a beggar.