



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

How the Beggars Came to Town

L. Frank Baum

*Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town:
Some in rags, and some in tags,
And some in velvet gown.*

Very fair and sweet was little Prince Lilimond, and few could resist his soft, pleading voice and gentle blue eyes. And as he stood in the presence of the King, his father, and bent his knee gracefully before His Majesty, the act was so courteous and dignified it would have honored the oldest nobleman of the court.

The King was delighted, and for a time sat silently regarding his son and noting every detail of his appearance, from the dark velvet suit with its dainty ruffles and collar to the diamond buckles on the little shoes, and back again to the flowing curls that clustered thick about the bright, childish face.

Well might any father be proud of so manly and beautiful a child, and the King's heart swelled within him as he gazed upon his heir.

"Borland," he said to the tutor, who stood modestly behind the Prince, "you may retire. I wish to speak privately with his royal highness."

The tutor bowed low and disappeared within the ante-room, and the King continued, kindly,

"Come here, Lilimond, and sit beside me. Me thinks you seem over-grave this morning."

"It is my birthday, Your Majesty," replied the Prince, as he slowly obeyed his father and sat beside him upon the rich brodered cushions of the throne. "I am twelve years of age."

"So old!" said the King, smiling into the little face that was raised to his. "And is it the weight of years that makes you sad?"

"No, Your Majesty; I long for the years to pass, that I may become a man, and take my part in the world's affairs. It is the sad condition of my country which troubles me."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the King, casting a keen glance at his son. "Are you becoming interested in politics, then; or is there some grievous breach of court

etiquette which has attracted your attention?"

"I know little of politics and less of the court, sire," replied Lilimond; "it is the distress of the people that worries me."

"The people? Of a surety, Prince, you are better posted than am I, since of the people and their affairs I know nothing at all. I have appointed officers to look after their interests, and therefore I have no cause to come into contact with them myself. But what is amiss?"

"They are starving," said the Prince, looking at his father very seriously; "the country is filled with beggars, who appeal for charity, since they are unable otherwise to procure food."

"Starving!" repeated the King; "surely you are misinformed. My Lord Chamberlain told me but this morning the people were loyal and contented, and my Lord of the Treasury reports that all taxes and tithes have been paid, and my coffers are running over."

"Your Lord Chamberlain is wrong, sire," returned the Prince; "my tutor, Borland, and I have talked with many of these beggars the past few days, and we find the tithes and taxes which have enriched you have taken the bread from their wives and children."

"So!" exclaimed the King. "We must examine into this matter." He touched a bell beside him, and when a retainer appeared directed his Chamberlain and his Treasurer to wait upon him at once.

The Prince rested his head upon his hand and waited patiently, but the King was very impatient indeed till the high officers of the court stood before him. Then said the King, addressing his Chamberlain,

"Sir, I am informed my people are murmuring at my injustice. Is it true?"

The officer cast an enquiring glance at the Prince, who met his eyes gravely, before he replied,

"The people always murmur, Your Majesty. They are many, and not all can be content, even when ruled by so wise and just a King. In every land and in every age there are those who rebel against the laws, and the protests of the few are ever heard above the contentment of the many."

"I am told," continued the King, severely, "that my country is overrun with beggars, who suffer for lack of the bread we have taken from them by our taxations. Is this true?"

"There are always beggars, Your Majesty, in every country," replied the Chamberlain, "and it is their custom to blame others for their own misfortunes."

The King thought deeply for a moment; then he turned to the Lord of the Treasury.

"Do we tax the poor?" he demanded.

"All are taxed, sire," returned the Treasurer, who was pale from anxiety, for never before had the King so questioned him, "but from the rich we take much, from the poor very little."

"But a little from the poor man may distress him, while the rich subject would never feel the loss. Why do we tax the poor at all?"

"Because, Your Majesty, should we declare the poor free from taxation all your subjects would at once claim to be poor, and the royal treasury would remain empty. And as none are so rich but there are those richer, how should we, in justice, determine which are the rich and which are the poor?"

Again the King was silent while he pondered upon the words of the Royal Treasurer. Then, with a wave of his hand, he dismissed them, and turned to the Prince, saying,

"You have heard the wise words of my councilors, Prince. What have you to say in reply?"

"If you will pardon me, Your Majesty, I think you are wrong to leave the affairs of the people to others to direct. If you knew them as well as I do, you would distrust the words of your councilors, who naturally fear your anger more than they do that of your subjects."

"If they fear my anger they will be careful to do no injustice to my people. Surely you cannot expect me to attend to levying the taxes myself," continued the King, with growing annoyance. "What are my officers for, but to serve me?"

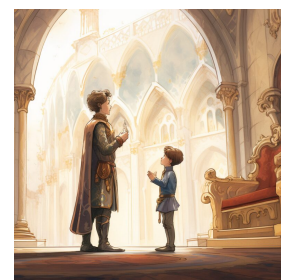
"They should serve you, it is true," replied the Prince, thoughtfully, "but they should serve the people as well."

"Nonsense!" answered the King; "you are too young as yet to properly understand such matters. And it is a way youth has to imagine it is wiser than age and experience combined. Still, I will investigate the subject further, and see that justice is done the poor."

"In the meantime," said the Prince, "many will starve to death. Can you not assist these poor beggars at once?"

"In what way?" demanded the King.

"By giving them money from your full coffers."



"Nonsense!" again cried the King, this time with real anger; "you have heard what the Chamberlain said: we always have beggars, and none, as yet, have starved to death. Besides, I must use the money for the grand ball and tourney next month, as I have promised the ladies of the court a carnival of unusual magnificence."

The Prince did not reply to this, but remained in silent thought, wondering what he might do to ease the suffering he feared existed on every hand amongst the poor of the kingdom. He had hoped to persuade the King to assist these beggars, but since the interview with the officers of the court he had lost heart and despaired of influencing his royal father in any way.

Suddenly the King spoke.

"Let us dismiss this subject, Lilimond, for it only serves to distress us both, and no good can come of it. You have nearly made me forget it is your birthday. Now listen, my son: I am much pleased with you, and thank God that he has given me such a successor for my crown, for I perceive your mind is as beautiful as your person, and that you will in time be fitted to rule the land with wisdom and justice. Therefore I promise, in honor of your birthday, to grant any desire you may express, provided it lies within my power. Nor will I make any further condition, since I rely upon your judgment to select some gift I may be glad to bestow."

As the King spoke, Lilimond suddenly became impressed with an idea through which he might succor the poor, and therefore he answered,

"Call in the ladies and gentlemen of the court, my father, and before them all will I claim your promise."

"Good!" exclaimed the King, who looked for some amusement in his son's request; and at once he ordered the court to assemble.

The ladies and gentlemen, as they filed into the audience chamber, were astonished to see the Prince seated upon the throne beside his sire, but being too well bred to betray their surprise they only wondered what amusement His Majesty had in store for them.

When all were assembled, the Prince rose to his feet and addressed them.

"His Majesty the King, whose kindness of heart and royal condescension is well known to you all, hath but now promised me, seeing that it is my birthday, to grant any one request that I may prefer. Is it not true, Your Majesty?"

"It is true," answered the King, smiling upon his son, and pleased to see him addressing the court so gravely and with so manly an air; "whatsoever the Prince may ask, that will I freely grant."

"Then, oh sire," said the Prince, kneeling before the throne, "I ask that for the period of one day I may reign as King in your stead, having at my command all kingly power and the obedience of all who owe allegiance to the crown!"

For a time there was perfect silence in the court, the King growing red with dismay and embarrassment and the courtiers waiting curiously his reply. Lilimond still remained kneeling before the throne, and as the King looked upon him he realized it would be impossible to break his royal word. And the affair promised him amusement after all, so he quickly decided in what manner to reply.

"Rise, oh Prince," he said, cheerfully, "your request is granted. Upon what day will it please you to reign?"

Lilimond arose to his feet.

"Upon the seventh day from this," he answered.

"So be it," returned the King. Then, turning to the royal herald he added, "Make proclamation throughout the kingdom that on the seventh day from this Prince Lilimond will reign as King from sunrise till sunset. And whoever dares to disobey his commands will be guilty of treason and shall be punished with death!"

The court was then dismissed, all wondering at this marvellous decree, and the Prince returned to his own apartment where his tutor, Borland, anxiously awaited him.

Now this Borland was a man of good heart and much intelligence, but wholly unused to the ways of the world. He had lately noted, with much grief, the number of beggars who solicited alms as he walked out with the Prince, and he had given freely until his purse was empty. Then he talked long and earnestly with the Prince concerning this shocking condition in the kingdom, never dreaming that his own generosity had attracted all the beggars of the city toward him and encouraged them to become more bold than usual.

Thus was the young and tender-hearted Prince brought to a knowledge of all these beggars, and therefore it was that their condition filled him with sadness and induced him to speak so boldly to the King, his father.

When he returned to Borland with the tidings that the King had granted him permission to rule for a day the kingdom, the tutor was overjoyed, and at once they began to plan ways for relieving all the poor of the country in that one day.

For one thing, they dispatched private messengers to every part of the kingdom, bidding them tell each beggar they met to come to the Prince on that one day he should be King and he would relieve their wants, giving a broad gold piece to every poor man or woman who asked.

For the Prince had determined to devote to this purpose the gold that filled the royal coffers; and as for the great ball and tourney the King had planned, why, that could go begging much better than the starving people.

On the night before the day the Prince was to reign there was a great confusion of noise within the city, for beggars from all parts of the kingdom began to arrive, each one filled with joy at the prospect of receiving a piece of gold.

There was a continual tramp, tramp of feet, and a great barking of dogs, as all dogs in those days were trained to bark at every beggar they saw, and now it was difficult to restrain them.

And the beggars came to town singly and by twos and threes, until hundreds were there to await the morrow. Some few were very pitiful to behold, being feeble and infirm from age and disease, dressed in rags and tags, and presenting an appearance of great distress. But there were many more who were seemingly hearty and vigorous; and these were the lazy ones, who, not being willing to work, begged for a livelihood.

And some there were dressed in silken hose and velvet gowns, who, forgetting all shame, and, eager for gold, had been led by the Prince's offer to represent themselves as beggars, that they might add to their wealth without trouble or cost to themselves.

The next morning, when the sun arose upon the eventful day, it found the Prince sitting upon the throne of his father, dressed in a robe of ermine and purple, a crown upon his flowing locks and the King's scepter clasped tightly in his little hand. He was somewhat frightened at the clamor of the crowd without the palace, but Borland, who stood behind him, whispered,

"The more you can succor the greater will be your glory, and you will live in the hearts of your people as the kind Prince who relieved their sufferings. Be of good cheer, Your Majesty, for all is well."

Then did the Prince command the Treasurer to bring before him the royal coffers, and to stand ready to present to each beggar a piece of gold. The Treasurer was very unwilling to do this, but he was under penalty of death if he refused, and so the coffers were brought forth.

"Your Majesty," said the Treasurer, "if each of those who clamor without is to receive a piece of gold, there will not be enough within these coffers to go around. Some will receive and others be denied, since no further store of gold is to be had."

At this news the Prince was both puzzled and alarmed.

"What are we to do?" he asked of the tutor; but Borland was unable to suggest a

remedy.

Then said the aged Chamberlain, coming forward, and bowing low before the little King,

"Your Majesty, I think I can assist you in your difficulty. You did but promise a piece of gold to those who are really suffering and in need, but so great is the greed of mankind that many without are in no necessity whatever, but only seek to enrich themselves at your expense. Therefore I propose you examine carefully each case that presents itself, and unless the beggar is in need of alms turn him away empty-handed, as being a fraud and a charlatan."

"Your counsel is wise, oh Chamberlain," replied the Prince, after a moment's thought; "and by turning away the impostors we shall have gold enough for the needy. Therefore bid the guards to admit the beggars one by one."

When the first beggar came before him the Prince asked,

"Are you in need?"

"I am starving, Your Majesty," replied the man, in a whining tone. He was poorly dressed, but seemed strong and well, and the Prince examined him carefully for a moment. Then he answered the fellow, saying,

"Since you are starving, go and sell the gold ring I see you are wearing upon your finger. I can assist only those who are unable to help themselves."

At this the man turned away muttering angrily, and the courtiers murmured their approval of the Prince's wisdom.

The next beggar was dressed in velvet, and the Prince sent him away with a sharp rebuke. But the third was a woman, old and feeble, and she blessed the Prince as she hobbled joyfully away with a broad gold-piece clasped tightly within her withered hand.

The next told so pitiful a story that he also received a gold-piece; but as he turned away the Prince saw that beneath his robe his shoes were fastened with silver buckles, and so he commanded the guards to take away the gold and to punish the man for attempting to deceive his King.

And so many came to him that were found to be unworthy that he finally bade the guards proclaim to all who waited that any who should be found undeserving would be beaten with stripes.

That edict so frightened the imposters that they quickly fled, and only those few who were actually in want dared to present themselves before the King.

And lo! the task that had seemed too great for one day was performed in a few hours, and when all the needy had been provided for but one of the royal coffers

had been opened, and that was scarcely empty!

"What think you, Borland?" asked the Prince, anxiously, "have we done aright?"

"I have learned, Your Majesty," answered the tutor, "that there is a great difference between those who beg and those who suffer for lack of bread. For, while all who needed aid were in truth beggars, not all the beggars needed aid; and hereafter I shall only give alms to those I know to be honestly in want."

"It is wisely said, my friend," returned the Prince, "and I feel I was wrong to doubt the wisdom of my father's councilors. Go, Borland, and ask the King if he will graciously attend me here."

The King arrived and bowed smilingly before the Prince whom he had set to reign in his own place, and at once the boy arose and presented his sire with the scepter and crown, saying,

"Forgive me, oh my King, that I presumed to doubt the wisdom of your rule. For, though the sun has not yet set, I feel that I am all unworthy to sit in your place, and so I willingly resign my power to your more skillful hands. And the coffers which I, in my ignorance, had determined to empty for the benefit of those unworthy, are still nearly full, and more than enough remains for the expenses of the carnival. Therefore forgive me, my father, and let me learn wisdom in the future from the justness of your rule."

Thus ended the reign of Prince Lilimond as King, and not till many years later did he again ascend the throne upon the death of his father.

And really there was not much suffering in the kingdom at any time, as it was a prosperous country and well governed; for, if you look for beggars in any land you will find many, but if you look only for the deserving poor there are less, and these all the more worthy of succor.

I wish all those in power were as kind-hearted as little Prince Lilimond, and as ready to help the needy, for then there would be more light hearts in the world, since it is "better to give than to receive."

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