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The beggar and the thief

Ricardo Flores Magón

1915

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Along the cheerful boulevard, pedestrians come and go, perfumed, elegant, insulting. The beggar is sticking to the wall, his insistent hand in front of him, a servile supplication trembling on his lips:

“Alms for the poor, for the love of God!”

Occasionally, a coin falls in the panhandler’s palm. He quickly stuffs it into his pocket as he lavishes degrading praise and gratitude upon his beneficiary. The thief passes by, but can not avoid the entreaties of the beggar, and he scowls contemptuously. The panhandler becomes indignant, and this indignation makes him red with anger. He growls with irritation:

“Why don’t you blush from embarrassment, scoundrel? You are looking face to face with an honorable man like myself. I respect the law: I do not commit the crime of putting my hand in another person’s pocket. My footsteps are firm, like all the good citizens who do not regularly scamper on tiptoe around other people’s homes in the silence of the night. I can show my face in all places. I do not avoid the eyes of the police. The rich look at me benevolently. Throwing a coin in my hat, they pat my shoulder, saying to me ‘good man!’”

The thief lowers the brim of his hat to his nose and gestures as if he were vomiting. He casts a glance, scrutinizing all around him, and replies to the beggar:

“Do not wait for me to blush in front of you, vile beggar! Are you honorable? Honor does not live on its knees waiting for someone to fling a bone for it to nibble upon. Honor puts on airs of excellence. I do not know if I am honorable or not. However, I admit to you that I do not lack the courage to beg rich people to give me, for the love of God, a crumb of what they have despoiled from me. Who violates the law? It is clear; but the law is a very distinct thing from justice. I violate the law written by the bourgeoisie, and this violation contains in it an act of justice, because the law authorizes rich people to rob at the expense of poor people. This is an injustice. By snatching from the rich a fraction of what they have robbed from us poor people, I am executing an act of justice. The rich pat you on the shoulder for your servility, your base abjectness, endorsing their tranquil enjoyment of what is rightfully yours and mine, of all the things they have robbed from all the poor people all over the world. The ideal of the rich is that all the poor should have the souls of beggars. If you were a man, you would bite the hand of the rich who tosses you a crust of bread. I scorn you!”

The thief spits and loses himself in the multitude. The beggar lifts his eyes to the sky and groans:

“Alms for the poor, for the love of God”