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Highway Robbery

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Chapter One

There are good things and bad things about being small. You wouldn't know about that, though, would you, sir? Fine tall gentleman like yourself. But it's true. One good thing is that people often mistake me for being much younger than I am, and that makes them take pity on me.

Especially the women, the ones that have their own children at home. And especially the poor ones, who know that there isn't much keeping their own little ones from begging in the streets like me. Not that I'm begging now, sir. I wouldn't want you to think that, not for a minute.

I had a change in my fortunes, sir, you see. You might not know it from looking at me – not yet, anyway. But it's true all the same. And if I hadn't been so small, it would never have happened.

You see, one of the bad things about being small is that most of the other beggar lads on the streets are bigger. And if you're bigger, you can throw your weight around, so to speak.

You can choose the best place to
beg and no one's going to bother you,
provided you don't annoy the shopkeepers and scare off
their custom.

But if you're small, it's different.
Whenever I found a good spot I was always
chased off by some bigger lad, and many's
the bruise I've had to show for it, you can
take my word on that. One fellow hit me
so hard I couldn't hear anything for a week.

But that was some time ago, sir, and I can
hear as well as anyone now.
Why I'm telling you this is by way of
explanation for how I ended up begging so
far from the centre of the city. I was way
out on the outskirts on the day my luck
changed. It was a cold, miserable day that
couldn't decide whether it wanted to rain
or snow. I had a pair of boots once but
they were so often wet that the nails came
through and it was like trying to walk on a
pair of hedgehogs, and that's the truth, sir.
I let another lad steal them off me just for
the pleasure of hearing him howl when he
put them on.

But on that day, on the edge of the city,
I had no boots and my feet were as cold as
ice and my hands were not much better. I
was hungry too, but then I'm used to that.
I do remember a time when I wasn't
hungry, sir, but it was only for a very short

time and it was a very long while ago. There wasn't much traffic through that street, either. It was one of those nasty, muddy little streets, all pigs and gardyloo, which carts avoid because they're always getting stuck. There were a few people walking, but no one who came along had a coin or a crust of bread to spare for me, so all in all it looked as if it was going to be a very bad day for me. But then, in the blink of an eye, my luck changed.
I heard him before I saw him. I heard him through my stone-cold feet first, and then I heard him through the air, and he was like a distant storm approaching, so I couldn't tell what I was hearing. Then the sound grew nearer and clearer. It was galloping hooves, clattering through muck and ice.

Round the corner he came, a tall rider on a big black horse, and the pigs and chickens cleared the road in double-quick time to get out of his way. I stepped back myself, sir, even though I was already well out of the road, and I squeezed myself tight against the wall. Still he came on, at full tilt, his black cloak streaming in the air behind him, and now I could see his face, his cheeks red from the cold and his moustaches as black as the black horse under him.

He didn't look at me at all as he came on,

but I saw his eye fix on something beside
me. The alleyway, I think it was. And just
as he drew level, he straightened in the
saddle and reined in the mare so fast she sat

right down on her tail in a shower of mud.
Some of it hit me in the face, sir. That's
how close I was.

The rider sprang off as light as a cat
and pulled the reins over the horse's head.
Then he marched straight over to me and
put them into my hand. I gaped up at him
and my mouth must have been as big as
a badger hole. You can imagine, I'm sure,
how astonished I was. He was very tall,
that man, and his cheeks were red and he
was breathing hard and there were teartracks
across his face. He looked wild and
mad, sir, and I have to admit that the sight
of him terrified me.

But of course, the way he looked was
not because he was angry or excited but
because he had been travelling so fast
through the icy weather. And indeed, when
he opened his mouth, it was not to yell at
me, which is what I expected, but to say,
quite gently:

'Hold the mare for me, lad.
And when I come back, I'll give you a
golden guinea.'

And he ruffled my hair for me, sir. Look. Like this. Made it stand up like a bunch of straw. I would have done anything for him after that. I don't often meet with kindness, as I'm sure you can imagine. So I clutched tight to those reins and I closed my badger-hole mouth and I nodded my head until my teeth rattled. 'You can rely on me, sir,' I said. 'I won't move an inch from here until you come back.'

'Good lad,' he said. He pulled a saddlebag from the horse's withers, then unfastened his cloak and laid it carefully over her back. That will tell you, sir, how much value he set on his mare, because it was a cold day for a gentleman to be out and about in his shirt-sleeves. He patted her on the neck, winked at me, and then he was gone, slipping away down the alley and out of sight.