THE BEGGARS OF ENGLAND IN PROSE AND POETRY (PART I) FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO THE END OF THE 17TH CENTURY. INAUGURAL-DISSERTATION

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The Beggars of England

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(Part I)

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the earliest times to the end of the 17th Century.

Inaugural-Dissertation,

der philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Bern

zur

Erlangung der Doktorwürde vorgelegt

von

Albert Tschopp.

Von der philosophischen Fakultät auf Antrag des Herrn Professor Dr. Müller-Hess angenommen.

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Prof. Dr. Ed. Fischer,
z. Z. Dekan.

Introduction.

The idea of this dissertation came to me whilst studying the sources of Burns' »Jolly Beggars«. I tried to find out the position held by the beggar in the annals of English Literature, whether the beggar played a rôle in drama or ballad or if expressions of his language had entered the English vocabulary.

Dr. Binz, Professor of the University Bâle, gave me valuable help in my researches and I owe to him, as also to Professor Dr. Müller-Hess of Bern, under whose direction I completed my dissertation, a deep sense of obligation and gratitude.

Concerning the Introduction and Preservation of the Beggar Ballad.

It is interesting to mark the progress of the ballad and its different language and tendency in the various centuries.

In early years the ballad was rude and powerful, generally describing battle-scenes or tales of extraordinary marvel. As the centuries advanced so did the taste change and in the 12th century we find the simple and rough pictures of the 10th and 11th century no longer acceptable. Again in the 16th and 17th centuries do we note a marked change. The former ballads are voted improbable and insipid, in the place of which short, rollicking songs and ballads of a gay and somewhat immoral tendency are substituted.

It is to these latter that we owe the greater part of our jovial beggar literature, although even the earliest ballad-writers were not averse to the familiar figure with his: »wallet and staff and clouted rags«. The beggar ballads had the same fate as all the other Mediæval songs and poems. They were recited, sung, or accompanied by the harp, but seldom written down. It is for this reason that the English Ballad has descended to us in such an imperfect condition. We often find whole stanzas missing and passages utterly incomprehensible.

The general way in which we have come into the possession of the most valuable English ballads is by mothers singing them to their children or old women reciting them, having heard their ancestors recite the poems before them. There are, however, some extant

copies of ballads printed in the 16th century[1]) and it is not improbable that more collections exist hidden from the public eye.

It was the general habit of singing which caused the enormous demand for ballads in the Middle Ages. A »song and a toast« was the finale of every banquet and, in fact, it was not only at the conclusion, but during the meal itself that music was demanded. Langland[2]) says that at the tables of the rich there were only two amusements: »to listen to the minstrels and when they were silent to scoff at religion«.[3]) At the tables of the poor and round the stove of the ale-house *beggars* often supplied the place of minstrels, their lively songs and merry descriptions of different towns through which they had roamed forming a pleasing diversion and accompaniment to the, »jolly good ale and old«. C 17, 74 . . . C 7, 374 . . . C 7, 362 . . .

The greatest restorer of the old English ballad is Percy to whom we owe some of our most interesting beggar poems notably: »The Beggar of Bednal Green«, King Cophetua and the Beggarmaid etc. etc. Child also, in his »English and Scottish Ballads«, has unearthed a collection of poems of an historical and narrative character.

In the »Roxburgh Collection« and »Bagford Ballads« we are treated to a more recent and lighter style of poetry peculiarly adapted to the introduction of the beggar with all his fun and cunning.

Most of our personal research after beggars was, however, laid in books now long out of print.

The ballads supplied the *poetry* of the beggar's life, but we had to search deeper for the *prose*.

[1]) Collections of ballads: The Roxburghe and Pepys Collections.
Modern Collection by Percy & Child.
The Motherwell Collection.
Wit and Mirth 1714, 1719.
Pills to Purge Melancholy 1684.

[2]) Langland C 7, 371.

[3]) Langland C, pass. XII. 35—39.

On the Increase and Development of Beggary in England.

»Gif man cuman feormæd III niht an his âgenum hâme, cêpeman odde odderne, pe siô ofer mearce cuman, and hine ponne his mete fêde, and he ponne œnigum mæn yfel gedô, se man pane ôderne œt rihte gebrenge odde rihte gebrenge odde riht fore wyrce«. This is the first mention of vagabondage we know of. It is to be found in the »Hlodhæres and Eâdrîces dômas edited by Schmid, p. 15. And strange! the second law against beggars issued by Wihraêdi is directed against the tonsured monk roaming and begging in the country: »Gif bescoren man steôrleâs gange him an gest-lîdnesse, gefe him man âenes, and pæt ne geweorde, buton he leâfnesse hæbbe, pæt hine man læng feormige«. (Schmid p. 16.)

Aedelstâne also published a law against those people »qui dominos non habent« which demands from »pære mægde, pæt hî hine tô folc-ryhte gehâmetten and him hlâford finden on folc-gemôte« (Schmid p. 133). Ethelred admonishes his people to be good and charitable towards the poor and not to annoy and torment« aelpeôdige men and feorran cumone«. (Schmid p. 234.)

In the reign of Edward the Confessor the law regarding the harbouring of beggars became more elaborate. The principal item of this law was to the effect that if a man harboured a beggar for *more than two nights*, that beggar became one of the household and the master was held by law responsible for his acts: tuua nicte geste pe pirdde nicte acte agen hine«. (Schmid, 504.)

The Anglo-Saxon kings seem to have been rather kind and hospitable to the beggar; King Oswald became quite proverbial for his great charity.

There is no doubt that Cnut's law concerning the »freônd leâsan« (Schmid p. 292) also includes the beggar and vagabond: »let him submit to prison and there abide until he go to God's ordeal and let him fare as he may, if he be so distressed that he has no »borh at the frumtyht«.

But the beggar became ever more numerous and dangerous and we find William the Conqueror publishing a law to the effect that if a man harboured a beggar »ultra III nuis« that he became one of the household. (Schmid p. 330.)

Under Norman rule the law against the harbouring of vagrants and »frôendleâsen« was a repetition of the above. At the beginning of the Plantagenet period and all through the 12th century alms-giving to beggars was ordered by the church and many elaborate charities were established by the pious, such as the distribution of clothes and food on different saint's days.

Beggars were now very much on the increase, their favourable treatment serving rather to swell than diminish their ranks.[1])

An enormous increase of beggary took place after the terrible Black Death (1348).[2]) Scarcity of labour and misery were the primary causes. The roads became infested and able-bodied men capable of work were found disguising themselves as cripples, often only awaiting an opportunity to spring upon and rob the unwary.

The beggar of this period was, from general account, a dangerous, cunning and ferocious individual, extortionating alms from the passer by.

[1]) Vide Robert Hitchcock's: »Polite Plat«. 1580. Arber's English Garland. Vol. II. p. 160.
[2]) Langland C 11, 272.

Strenuous laws now followed one after another, especially directed against the »able-bodied« beggar who refused to work. In the last year of King Edward III we find the Commons petitioning the king: »that Ribalds and sturdy Beggars may be banished out of every town«.

It was about this time that *Langland* wrote his celebrated: »Vision of Piers Ploughman» giving us a wonderful insight into the degradation, hypocricy and habitual idleness of the beggar of that period.

Piers is of opinion that if the church would have lent its aid, begging would have been greatly reduced in England and that the indiscriminate charity given in atonement for sin was accountable for much un-necessary evil. (»And holychurche helpe to-so sholde no man begge«. Piers Ploughmann, Skeat's Edition 11. 184. C.)

In Richard IInds reign beggary and vagabondism became more and more rampant and an important law was passed making a distinction between »able-bodied« beggars and impotent ones. But in spite of law and statute nothing seems to have been strong enough to put down the ever increasing mob of mendicants and we find by the end of the 14th century that England is positively over-run with »feitors and vagrants«.

To get an idea of the great number of beggars and their doings in this and subsequent centuries we have only to look through the rolls and statutes levied against them in the reigns of Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Elizabeth and James Ist [1])

The »wyuen pyne« or whipping post and the stocks were often their punishment v. Langland C 6. 131, 132. C. 3. 216. Persons deformed, diseased, or otherwise unfit for labour were allowed to beg on condition that they

[1]) To be found in the »Acts of Parliament« in Elizabeth's reign Parliament Street and Mr. Ribton-Turners volume on »Vagrants and Vagrancy«.