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*Chapter 1*  
*A Stranger Comes to Town*

**T**or was hungry. Hunger was a common experience in Tor's short life. He merely tightened the dingy rags about his middle and continued to stare at the group of sparrows quarreling noisily in the red dust of the street. It had occurred to Tor that the life of a sparrow must be vastly more pleasant than that of a boy. "They find plenty to eat," he told himself enviously, as he hugged his lean little body. With a sudden impulse the child flung a pebble into the midst of the fowls. The birds shook the dust from their ruffled feathers with noisy clamor of dismay, darted into the bright air, and disappeared far above the tops of the tallest houses.

Tor laughed aloud as a second idea struggled with the first in his clouded brain. Then he checked himself thoughtfully, and winding his rags more closely about him, trotted noiselessly away down the street.

Chelluh, the blind beggar for more years than one could count on the fingers of both hands, and the undisputed proprietor of a snug corner just within the

Damascus gate, was shaking his brazen cup after his daily custom. The cup rattled bravely for certain coins had already been dropped therein by the generous.

“Have mercy, kind lords of Jerusalem. Have mercy on the sorrows of one born blind!” chanted the beggar in his whining monotone. “Kind lords, beautiful ladies, only a denarius, I beseech you, and may the blessings of heaven—” The blind man paused, his quick ear catching the sound of a hesitating foot step amid the hurrying steps which passed in and out at the open gate. “Now may Jove, Jehovah, and all lesser gods be gracious unto thee, noble sir,” he began.

Suddenly this professional complainer broke into a bellow of anger and alarm. “Help! Thieves! Murder!” he cried. “My money—my hard-earned money! Someone has stolen my money!” When no one appeared to pay the slightest heed to his outcries, the beggar beat upon the ground in a very fury of impotent rage.

Tor, standing well out of range of the whirling staff, regarded the blind man with a pleased smile. For the moment he had quite forgotten that he was hungry. “Aha! My very good master,” he cried tauntingly, “and who is it who will fast today—ay, and perchance tomorrow!”

At sound of the shrill childish voice the beggar sprang to his feet with a vile imprecation. “Is it thou, spawn of the dust, who hast dared to rob me?” he screamed, making a vicious rush in the direction of the voice. “Come hither, that I may break every bone of thy thieving body!”

“What if I choose not to be beaten?” inquired Tor, coolly evading the groping fingers of the beggar. “What if I will to exchange thy good coin for bread? Yesterday thou gave me naught save a beating. Today I have had but a bellyful of curses. I tell thee I will serve thee no longer. May Jove, Jehovah, and all lesser gods be gracious unto thee!”

With this mocking farewell the boy darted away, and being for the moment almost as unseeing as his late master by reason of the hunger which tore him urgently, ran straight into the arms of a man who had been curiously watching the scene from the shelter of an archway.

“Let me go!” shrieked Tor, striving with all his puny strength to writhe out of the powerful grasp of his captor. “Let me go, I say!” Then, like an animal, he twisted about and buried his sharp white teeth in the brown hand that held him.

“Ouf! Verily thou art a wolf-whelp!” cried the stranger, lightly cuffing the child’s ears. “Hold hard, small one, till I find how thy matters lie with the fellow yonder.”

“Give the lad into the hand of his lawful master, and may heaven reward thee, noble sir,” cried Chelluh, making his way rapidly toward the two with the aid of his staff. “The boy is mine—alas, that I should have begotten such an undutiful one. Yet because of mine infirmity—I am helpless, as thou seest—yes, but give him into my hand and I will speedily requite him for robbing me of my last coin.”

“Didst thou steal his money, boy?” asked the stranger, stooping to look into the child’s pinched face.

“Yes,” said Tor, his big, bright eyes fixed upon the beggar in manifest terror. “I was hungry. Let me go or I will bite.”

“Ah, little dog, thy teeth shall be broken for that word,” mumbled the beggar, feeling after the child with a ferocious chuckle. “Give him to me—ah!”

“Not so fast, friend, not so fast,” said the stranger quietly, drawing the boy away from the grimy talons outstretched to seize him. “This is thy son, sayst thou? Why, then, is the child starving and naked, whilst thou art sleek and well covered? Why is he bruised and bleeding like the dog thou didst call him, whilst thou art whole?”

The beggar bared his yellow teeth in a malevolent smile. “Why, herein is a marvel,” he said softly. “A noble stranger—for thy speech betrayeth thee, kind sir—come to Jerusalem for the Passover, perchance, for love, for war—the gods alone know thine errand—but delaying his so honorable affairs, his so important business, to look to a blind beggar’s brat. Sacred fire, but I am bowed to the earth before thy most noble condescension, who am not worthy to touch the hem of thy honorable garment. I have said that the boy is mine. If he be hungry, if he be naked, if he be bruised—what is that to a stranger from Galilee? Truly, he is but a dog of the gutters, but even a dog hath eyes and may be useful to one in my misfortune.”

“Wilt thou that I give thee into the hand of thy father?” asked the Galilean of the child, who no longer struggled to free himself.

“The man is not my father,” mumbled Tor hopelessly. “He will kill me.”

“You liest, my son, after your custom,” put in Chelluh, with a triumphant chuckle. “It is easy to kill—yes, and there is no one to tell me no—easy, but not profitable. I shall discipline you for your profit as is necessary for every son of Abraham. Permit me to salute you, most honorable stranger, ’tis already over long that we keep you from your business—my son and I.” And, leaning forward as if to humbly kiss the stranger’s robe, the beggar laid violent hands on the trembling child. “Oho! I have my fingers on you at last, rat of the gutter. Come now, and we will settle our matters! Five silver coins it was. Brr—Veil of the temple! What now?”

The stranger had forcibly relaxed the clutch of the bony fingers. “Here is your money,” he said, counting out from his broad palm the coins which the child passed over to him with a look of piteous appeal. “Five denarii, said you. As for the lad, if he hath the proper love for you he will doubtless return fast enough when you art in kindlier temper. If not, you art relieved of his keep. Come with me, boy, if you wouldst eat.”

“You art a swine!” screamed the beggar. “Dost hear me, Galilean? A swine—swine—swine! Your father, also, and the father of your father, your mother—sacred fire! Help! Help!”

The beggar lay sprawling in the dust, under a well-directed blow from the Galilean’s powerful fist. The stranger stood over him, breathing deep, his dark eyes flashing threatening fire. Then, shrugging

his shoulders slightly and muttering certain strange words under his breath, he stooped, picked up the beggar quite gently, and set him in his place. "Here is your staff, your cup, and your money, friend," he said calmly, ignoring the torrent of curses which spewed from the open mouth of the beggar like a foul stream. "My Master hath taught me that even such refuse as you must be handled with love. But, hark ye, fellow, no man may defile the name of my mother and stand before Peter, the fisherman."

The beggar strained his sightless eyes after the departing footsteps. "Peter, the fisherman," he repeated with a ferocious smile. "Ah, most honorable and never-to-be-forgotten benefactor, I humbly thank your noble honor for relating to me your name. May, Jove, Jehovah, and all lesser deities enable me to suitably repay the man, and I will offer of my gains a sacrifice—a yearling lamb, no less. I will, I swear it."