

ACT ONE

The stage is dark and deserted. A SPOTLIGHT rises center stage. In it lies the contorted and prostrate figure of a MAN. HE is sitting, if not lying, on a small mat made from what appears to be palm leaves. We can't quite tell how old the MAN is - and, indeed, we doubt that anyone really knows... least of all HIM. It seems HE is both young and old - and, as for the rest of HIM, there is a similar degree of ambiguity. HIS features broadcast neither harshness nor kindness. HIS smile broadcasts neither disdain nor happiness. The man is a mystery. One thing, however, that cannot be disputed is the MAN's condition. HE is, quite simply, disabled - HIS legs contorted as if having been beaten and twisted by some sinister force. They lay sprawled behind HIM like the dead afterthought of a sentence and almost speak to us - painfully so - in the angular nature of their contortions.

The MAN takes a moment to register that a SPOTLIGHT has uncovered HIS location. It's almost as if HE thought HE was safely hidden from our prying - or, indeed, from anyone's. HE looks up, therefore, with shock - but, upon seeing us, HE doesn't register dismay, as if a robber caught in the middle of some grand heist. Instead, HE grins a big smile - revealing a mouth with only a sporadic sprinkling of teeth. HE peers out at us for a moment - as if unable to focus fully - but soon HE sees all HE needs to see.

BEGGAR

Hello out there. It took me a moment, but I know who you are now. It's crystal clear to me. Why, it's like I'm looking in a mirror - because you're me. You're me and I'm you - although you may not believe it. I wouldn't blame you. We don't look alike, do we? I'm crippled, as you can see. My legs are twisted and contorted. They have been, for forty-one years, ever since I was small. Now, as for you fine people, your legs aren't contorted.

BEGGAR (CONT)

In fact, some of you have quite nice legs. Keep them that way. By appearances alone, we are not alike - but, well, you know what they say about appearances.

The BEGGAR grins wildly - showing off more teeth - or the lack thereof. HE uses HIS arms to scoot HIMSELF into a more upright position.

BEGGAR

I'm glad you've stopped by. It's always nice having someone new to talk to. That's one of the reasons I like my spot. There's always someone new - someone going in, someone going out... except me, that is. I'm always here. You can ask anybody. The sun rises and sets - and me? I lay here. It's fairly easy to know where both of us will be. The sun, he could be up or he could be down. Me, I'm only down - down and out - and here. That makes me even more dependable, which is a good thing. At least, I think it is. A pity all of that is about to change. I rather like things the way they are.

The FAINT RUSTLE of HUMAN SOUNDS begin to emerge from the back of the stage. The SPOTLIGHT brightens timidly as the BEGGAR sits more erect.

BEGGAR

I wonder where I should begin. Perhaps I'll begin at the beginning. It seems natural, doesn't it? But then I'm not one to be natural.

(Indicating HIS legs.)

Is this natural?

(Peering out at us.)

Are you?

(Nodding off towards a far corner of the theater.)

Is that?

The LIGHTS rise generally. A SMALL GURGLE of WATER sounds from a far-off corner of the stage. The GURGLE grows and grows and grows in volume. It is no longer a GURGLE, but a THRUSH. We could swear an ocean is near and that it is crashing upon some rocky shore. Some HUNGRY VOICES accompany the water. THEY seem to come from a thirsty mob of some sort. THEY clamor and call out desperately for some unknown source to come and save THEM. Then - SPLASH! We hear someone, something dive into water. The CRIES of LONGING become CRIES of DESPAIR. The BEGGAR smiles at

this and turns back to us with an amused, patronizing smile:

BEGGAR

There they go again. They run, only to be disappointed. That's a shame, if you ask me. That's why, these days, I just sit and watch. No use being disappointed, is there? I'm disappointed enough already. I've been here for over a decade, you know. I've seen many people come and go. I've seen young men get older and, if they're lucky, old men get younger. It all depends on whether they make the waters or not.

The BEGGAR looks at us surprisingly.

BEGGAR

Oh, now, don't look at me like that. Everyone knows the waters I'm talking about. This, this is the Temple at Jerusalem. It's the pride and joy of all the Jews. The water I'm talking about is the pool in the temple. They say that an angel comes down - from Heaven, I guess - and stirs the waters. He stirs the waters and, if you're lucky enough to be the first to dunk yourself in the whirlpool, you emerge, cured.

The BEGGAR smiles wryly and shrugs.

BEGGAR

Anyway, that's what the flyers say - but, more importantly, that's what people choose to believe. Me, I have my own opinion. People, they have theirs. You, you can have yours. I'll just keep mine to myself - and you, you do likewise. I have enough trouble to deal with these days, as you can see. Why, I've been crippled for thirty-six years.

The BEGGAR looks off again in the direction of the waters and thinks for a moment. HE is then jolted back into reality by some sudden, all-absorbing thought:

BEGGAR

Ah, but I digress, don't I?

An upright, sturdy statue on legs enters the stage - JOSEPHUS. HE is about 30, about 40, maybe 50 - it's hard to tell - although HIS bearing indicates age and rigidity. There is a maturity about the man that seems to hang like a pendulous cloud over HIS head. HE appears not unlike an Easter Island statue that has managed to extract itself from some earthly spot and explore the world, masquerading as a human. The man himself is equally as

rigid as this description makes HIM sound. HIS clothes are pristine and professional - scholarly even - as well THEY should be. The MAN before us is a scribe of the law and HE broadcasts the somber bearing of responsibility by which any judgement-giver would be so regally burdened.

BEGGAR

(All smiles - an act.)
Good morning to you, sir.

JOSEPHUS

Good morning to you, as well.

BEGGAR

Oh, I have every intention of making it one.

JOSEPHUS

I doubt it not. I come here every day and every day you say "good morning" and you give me a smile. Year after year, you greet me and you smile. One morning, I come here and expect to find you risen and gone. Yet, day after day, year after year, there you sit - and yet you smile.

BEGGAR

I look on the bright side, you see.

JOSEPHUS

I look on God's side - bright or not.

BEGGAR

(Mockingly?)
Oh, of course - God's side.

JOSEPHUS

Darkness is better, if it is meant for us, for, in that case, there is nothing fit to see.

BEGGAR

Well, then, if darkness is meant, I had rather smile through it.

JOSEPHUS

And so you do.

JOSEPHUS shifts HIS gaze off in the direction of the waters. The BEGGAR follows the glance.

BEGGAR

The angel came again.

JOSEPHUS

The angel will always come.

BEGGAR

Ah, such hope. That is why I sit here, sir.

JOSEPHUS

Of course.

BEGGAR

They cured the young man. His name is Nethenel. I am happy for him. He is young still. He can make the waters faster than the others.

(Suddenly turning back to JOSEPHUS.)

I never could - not even at his age.

JOSEPHUS

Why do you think that is?

BEGGAR

(Nodding to HIS legs.)

Oh, you must ask them that question.

JOSEPHUS

I doubt they can hear me, but you can.

BEGGAR

So can my legs, sir - although only through me. You talk and I hear you... and your voice, it travels into my head... and from there, it travels down my neck... and from there, down my spine... and from there, it splits in two - part down one leg, part down the other - until all of me hears everything. It's not my fault my legs don't answer back. They don't listen to me anyway. If they did, I'd be walking.

JOSEPHUS

The only thing that matters is what God hears.

BEGGAR

So true, yes - but men like me, we have no voice.

JOSEPHUS

God gave you a voice.

BEGGAR

He gave me my legs, too.

JOSEPHUS

All the more so you may use your voice.

BEGGAR

Oh, I sing praises, sir. I do truly - every day. I sit here and I sing praises to God. "Raise me up," I say. "Raise me up and I will do wonders for the world."

JOSEPHUS

And?

BEGGAR

I'm still here, aren't I?

JOSEPHUS

Perhaps because they're meek - you and your prayers.

BEGGAR

Well, now, I consider that a strategy, not a vice. The meek will inherit the Earth, you know.

JOSEPHUS

So.

BEGGAR

So... I'm waiting.

JOSEPHUS nods wryly and walks towards the opposite side of the stage.

BEGGAR

That's Josephus - chief scribe to the high priest. You'll be seeing a lot more of him. He has a key to every door in the temple and he makes it a point to open all of them. People come to Josephus for legal advice and that's because he is the law. Why, he could make it up as he goes along and no one would know - and, for that matter, no one would care. The Jews follow God, you see, but they follow God's law more. In fact, if God broke His own law, they'd be damn sure to prosecute Him. I guess that's what you call "the principle of the thing." These temple people, they don't like rocking boats.

MANASSEH

Josephus!

The BEGGAR turns with a jolt. A large, burly, furrow-browed man has entered off to the side of the stage. HE is dressed in simple, plain attire and looks like a particularly hard-natured working class sort of fellow. HE spies JOSEPHUS on the other side of the stage and frowns like a gargoyle atop some Gothic perch.

JOSEPHUS

Good morning, Manasseh.

MANASSEH

Good morning, Josephus.

JOSEPHUS

(Sensing the grumpiness.)

Is it?

MANASSEH

No.

JOSEPHUS

Then you lie in God's house.

BEGGAR

Oh, no, sir - I lie in God's house.

MANASSEH

Shut up, you!

BEGGAR

Good morning to you, too, sir. Would you like to help a poor, crippled man in need of love and charity?

MANASSEH

No.

BEGGAR

(To us.)
At least he's honest.

MANASSEH stomps over to JOSEPHUS like a rhinoceros in heat.

MANASSEH

Look here, Josephus - this beggar mob won't do. I told you the problem wouldn't die out. My guests are starting to complain again - and, when they complain, I lose business. The riff-raff are everywhere on these feast days. I have people packing up and moving to Asclepius's place. Imagine that! They'd rather stay in his rooms across town, not mine. And what's around him? Nothing. A cactus patch. A camel farm. Nothing - but a more attractive nothing than my something near the temple! What does that tell you, eh? You just can't let all the garbage of the universe lie about like litter on the streets.

MANASSEH discretely glances over at the BEGGAR.

MANASSEH

Besides him, there are all the others. He at least minds himself. The rest have enough initiative to be a bloody nuisance. They beg from my guests! They grab at people's garments. They follow them down the street. It's a damn disgusting sight, I can tell you!

JOSEPHUS

I understand your situation, Manasseh.

MANASSEH

You understand, fine - but I do more than understand. I suffer for it.

JOSEPHUS

You suffer, yes - but never more than they.

MANASSEH

I'll weep, then, when they start to lose guests.

JOSEPHUS

Be patient, Manasseh. Your sacrifice will be rewarded in Heaven.

MANASSEH

I'd prefer a down payment.

JOSEPHUS

I have no doubt - but you are not the only one who pays. The temple also has to feed - feed and clothe.

MANASSEH

Oh, yes - which is the real reason those scum are here. They're looking for free this and free that.

JOSEPHUS

You think we should drive the needy away?

MANASSEH

I think you should choose your cripples. Aren't they human, like the rest of us? A few are good. Most are rotten. Leave the rotten ones for Jove.

JOSEPHUS

You are a man of charity.

MANASSEH

I will be, yes, at this rate.

BEGGAR

You could even take up a spot next to me, sir. I will scoot over a bit. Perhaps someone will throw you a coin.

MANASSEH

Ay - for you to catch it for yourself.

The BEGGAR grins wildly. MANASSEH circles back to JOSEPHUS:

MANASSEH

I need your help, Josephus.

JOSEPHUS

I will pray for you, Manasseh.

MANASSEH

Is that some sort of joke?

JOSEPHUS

(Sharply.)

Is it?

MANASSEH

(Pausing, conscious of his surroundings.)

Well.. of course not - but, damn it, it won't do me much good now, will it?

JOSEPHUS

You never know. We are all on God's time, Manasseh - and God's time is the only time. We must all wait for the seconds to pass - and then the minutes - and then the hours - and, if you are still alive by that time, you will have forgotten what it is you were waiting for and simply cherish the fact that God blessed you with something to anticipate.

MANASSEH just stares at JOSEPHUS with confusion and exasperation. HE stares and stares and stares - until:

MANASSEH

So?

JOSEPHUS

What?

MANASSEH

So what are you going to do about it?

JOSEPHUS

The question is, Manasseh - what are you going to do about it?

MANASSEH makes to answer rather hastily and then stops. HE stares frustratedly at JOSEPHUS and then turns again at the BEGGAR. The BEGGAR smiles at HIM tauntingly. MANASSEH turns back to JOSEPHUS and searches in vain for a response.

JOSEPHUS

It is better for you not to have an answer.

MANASSEH

Oh, I have one - believe me.

JOSEPHUS

Then you best keep it to yourself.

MANASSEH

I will. I know what's good for me, and besides...

JOSEPHUS

Do you, then?

MANASSEH

Do I what?

JOSEPHUS

Do you know what's good for you?

MANASSEH

Of course! Who else would know it better?

JOSEPHUS

You are wrong. There is one who knows more - and He looks down upon you and He frowns. You care only for money and money is the worldliest of things.

MANASSEH

In that case, I suggest the temple be reminded of that, too.

JOSEPHUS

Perhaps - but you cannot remind if you yourself have forgotten.

MANASSEH

Then I won't. Now what about those blasted beggars?

JOSEPHUS

I advise learning from them in their craft. All the better then may you beg the Lord for forgiveness.

MANASSEH glares sullenly yet defeatedly. HE turns and stomps towards the exit - but, just before doing so, HE turns to JOSEPHUS:

MANASSEH

Look, anything you can do...

JOSEPHUS

Will be done.

MANASSEH stares at HIM for a moment and slowly nods. HE sneers at the BEGGAR and then exits. The BEGGAR grins wildly.

BEGGAR

(To JOSEPHUS.)
Well done, sir.

JOSEPHUS

I should be saying that to you.

JOSEPHUS turns and exits. The BEGGAR looks after HIM for a moment, then turns to us:

BEGGAR

He's a powerful one, Josephus - as he should be. He's the right hand of the high priest and four out of the five fingers on the left one. He basically runs things around here. The people who make speeches, the priests who light candles... they don't run things. Oh, they think they do - but they don't. They're too intoxicated by their own majesty - and it's a heady brew, believe me. Josephus is the real person who runs things. Everyone knows it, except the high priest. He's too busy talking to God - that is, when he can fit God in his schedule. When he can't, God talks to Josephus - which is most of the time. I think God talks to Josephus more than I do.

A LOUD GROAN erupts from one side of the stage. The BEGGAR turns towards the sound. A YOUNG MAN - about 20 or so - comes hobbling onstage. HIS name is JOSIAH. HE looks disheveled in an attractive, rock-star sort of way, as if HIS appearance were a diktat of style rather than fate. Indeed, HE appears to be perfectly healthy, except for a bad case of self-consciousness. However, despite this fact, there is a certain vibrancy and youthful optimism about the young man. The BEGGAR seems to sense this extra triumph of spirit - although, in honesty, we're not sure whether HE treats it with anything other than contempt.

BEGGAR

Good morning, Josiah.

JOSIAH looks up and smiles meekly.

BEGGAR

I said "good morning."

JOSIAH nods solemnly.

BEGGAR

What? Have you forgotten how to speak?

JOSIAH

I r-r-remember, th-thank you. I just d-don't want to s-say anything.

BEGGAR

Oh, I don't blame you. I wouldn't want to say anything either - not with a stammer like that. You know why the Devil is a cruel, heartless bastard? It's because he does everything half-way. He wouldn't be quite that bad otherwise. He gave me legs that can't walk, but a mind that loves to wander. He gave you a mouth that can't speak, but a mind that's full of words. He's a clever one, he is, which is why he's to be feared. You think they'd have us fear him if he were a fool?

(Beckoning.)

Sit.

JOSIAH frowns and sits. HE thinks to himself in somber contemplation.

BEGGAR

You didn't make it.

JOSIAH doesn't respond. HE doesn't want to discourse on the cares before HIM.

BEGGAR

You should go home.

JOSIAH

(With sudden virulence.)

No!

BEGGAR

Oh. Excuse me. I only thought...

JOSIAH

Fine, then. You th-th-think. I c-c-came here to d-do.

BEGGAR

Do what?

JOSIAH

D-d-d-d...

BEGGAR

Do what Nethenel just did?

JOSIAH

D-d-d-d...

BEGGAR

Fling yourself into the pool?

JOSIAH

N-n-no. I w-w-want...

BEGGAR

Come on. Spit it out.

JOSIAH

...w-want to f-f-feel the grace of G-God.

BEGGAR

God? Which one? There are so many these days. I can't even keep track of them all.

JOSIAH

Th-that is b-b-b...

BEGGAR

Blasphemy?

JOSIAH

Blasphemy.

BEGGAR

That depends on which God you're talking about.

JOSIAH

You kn-know w-w-which one.

JOSIAH snorts derisively and turns away from the BEGGAR.

BEGGAR

You're a weird one! You came here and you want to get better. Do you know who actually gets better? The fast ones. They may not be the virtuous. They may not be the honest. All they have to be is fast. That's God working for you. If you're fast, you win - and, if not, well... I guess that's it, isn't it? You're just too slow for the Almighty. I mean, look at you... You'll always be too slow - and, if you weren't too slow, you'd be too something else. Take my advice and sit here, like I do, and raise out your hands and cry out your needs and smile like a cherub when people drop money into your palms - and, trust me, you'll be all right. You don't have to be fast. You don't have to be anything. All you have to be is desperate - and that's not too hard, now is it? That's man's natural state - desperation. Life seeks to run you over anyway. Just lay down, instead of fighting it, and the rest will come.

JOSIAH looks at the BEGGAR for a moment with a mixture of awe and disdain. The BEGGAR grins at HIM like a salesman trying to bluff HIS way into a purchase. JOSIAH thinks for a moment and slowly shakes HIS head.

BEGGAR

What - you're twitching now, too?

JOSIAH

I'm sh-shaking my head - because you're wr-wr-wrong.

I'm wrong?

BEGGAR

You're wr-wr-wrong.

JOSIAH

Oh, but you're right.

BEGGAR

Y-y-yes.

JOSIAH

How do you figure that, then?

BEGGAR

(Tapping HIS heart.)
I know w-what's true... in here.

JOSIAH

Oh? Where's that?

BEGGAR

You kn-know where.

JOSIAH

(Mocking HIM.)
"N-n-nowhere" is right.

BEGGAR

G-God l-led me here for a r-r-r-reason.

JOSIAH

Sure - to make a great and mighty fool of you.

BEGGAR

Oh, st-st-stop it. I-t-t-told you. I kn-kn-know the truth, in here.

JOSIAH

The BEGGAR grins mischievously.

JOSIAH

You l-l-l-laugh.

BEGGAR

If God is so mighty, he'd find a better vessel for the truth, don't you think?

JOSIAH

Oh, w-what d-do you know?

BEGGAR

I know quite a bit, thank you.

JOSIAH

Well then, know, too, that I'm g-g-going to make that p-p-pool - and I'm g-going to do it when you're watching - and th-then what will you say?

BEGGAR

Nothing - for I'll be dead by then.

JOSIAH

Oh, I h-h-hope so.

The BEGGAR smiles lamely.

JOSIAH

I'm s-s-sorry. I d-didn't m-mean that.

BEGGAR

I know. You'd do much better if you had.

JOSIAH

I a-a-a-almost made it th-this time.

BEGGAR

Almost, eh?

JOSIAH

A-almost.

BEGGAR

Oh, yes, I know all about "almost." Like me, for instance - I'm almost walking.

JOSIAH glares back at the BEGGAR with hurt, angry eyes. HE starts to say something, but, too overcome and angry, nothing comes out. HE gives up, limps over to another corner of the stage, and sits. HIS back is pointedly facing away from the BEGGAR. The BEGGAR smiles at this and then turns to us:

BEGGAR

That's Josiah over here. He's young - too young. He's only been here for three weeks - but that's more than most. He still thinks that miracles are possible - miracles and fairies and all those other things that children believe in. Well, you can't blame them, can you? They have no grounding, do they? They have no perspective. That's it. They just accept what's fed to them, like babies do. It could be poison, for all they know. They just open up and swallow it. That's why the young don't survive long. Me, I know what to swallow and what not to - and I never swallow more than I can chew... never. As for him, he's swallowed too much - and now he's got indigestion.

A poised, elegant, but rather ravaged-looking woman enters - MIRIAM. SHE looks not unlike a beautiful statue - still young, still vibrant - but one polluted by constant bombardment of industrial smog. There is something grizzled and gritty beneath the marble veneer - but, at the very least, we can still see the marble. SHE carries a small basket filled with bread and is dressed in simple peasant clothes of little color or worth. SHE first encounters JOSIAH when SHE enters.

MIRIAM

Good afternoon, Josiah.

JOSIAH

It's m-m-morning, M-Miriam.

MIRIAM

Forgive me. I lose track of time.

BEGGAR

When you're working all night, I'm not surprised.

MIRIAM looks wryly at the BEGGAR with a "shut up" glower. SHE then turns back to JOSIAH and extends to HIM a piece of bread.

MIRIAM

Here. You look hungry.

JOSIAH

N-n-no. It's a-a-all right.

MIRIAM

Take it.

JOSIAH

N-n-no. I don't want to.

MIRIAM

But why?

JOSIAH

B-b-because there's s-s-someone who n-needs it more than I d-do.

BEGGAR

Oh, shut up and take it. This could be your last chance.

JOSIAH

For w-what?

BEGGAR

For anything.

JOSIAH

Oh, b-b-b...

BEGGAR

Believe it! In the next ten minutes, you could die. You could cackle like a vulture and fall to the ground - dead. That wouldn't be a pretty picture, I can tell you. And that person who'll be getting the bread instead of you? He could die, too - a minute after you - and then the person who'd get the bread next, he could die - and the same thing for the one after him and the one after that - and to think, all along, you could have eaten the damn thing for yourself.

MIRIAM sighs and practically shoves the bread into HIS hands.

MIRIAM

He's right. Take it.

MIRIAM sighs in annoyance and walks over to the BEGGAR.

MIRIAM

Good morning, you.

BEGGAR

Good morning, my dear.

MIRIAM

You seem especially gay this morning.

BEGGAR

Why shouldn't I be? I went to bed lame. I woke up lame.

JOSIAH

So?

BEGGAR

(Sharply.)
So I woke up, didn't I?

JOSIAH shakes HIS head and turns away.

MIRIAM

What's wrong with him?

BEGGAR

He's got a lot to learn.

MIRIAM

The waters stirred again.

BEGGAR

Yes - but not for him, of course. I told him, you have to be a rogue before they stir for you.

(Looking at HER mischievously.)

Perhaps you might help with that.

MIRIAM

Me? You're the expert.

The BEGGAR cackles.

BEGGAR

How much money did you get?

MIRIAM

How much money did you get?

BEGGAR

Come now. Women don't ask questions. That's what the men are for.

MIRIAM

(Threateningly.)

Ask then, and I'll give you an answer.

BEGGAR

Careful, my dear, I may hold you to that. Besides, you shouldn't be seen in the temple anymore. Josephus knows what you do - or, should I say, "who." Your veil of decency has been torn off. One of that innkeeper's guests complained about you yesterday. I heard the whole thing - and, of course, defended you vigorously. "Why are women plying their trade outside the temple?" he asked. "Because the inside is too full," I replied.

The BEGGAR laughs mischievously -
laughs and laughs and laughs.

BEGGAR

You're not laughing.

MIRIAM

I don't see a reason to.

BEGGAR

Because it's funny and I was clever.

MIRIAM

If you're so clever, then get off the ground and work.

BEGGAR

(Indicating HIS legs.)

That's a bit difficult, don't you think? Anyway, you walk more than enough streets for the both of us. Why, if I walked, too, I'd just add to the congestion.

MIRIAM

You add to that just sitting here.

BEGGAR

Oh, my, you're hilarious, you are.

MIRIAM

I have to be.

BEGGAR

You're so clever you might as well be lame, too.

MIRIAM

Maybe I am and I hide it well.

BEGGAR

Not well enough, so it seems.

MIRIAM

I can't help it that Josephus found out. What am I supposed to do now?

BEGGAR

I don't know - but you can't be doing it here. You have to give it a rest for a bit. Circle the streets near the palace for a spell and then take the long way home. It all comes down to Josephus - and, who knows, maybe you'll get lucky. He could go blind. He could die. He could lose his memory and forget you. He could be taken by Romans and put in a prison. Its all in God's hands at this point - or haven't you heard?

MIRIAM

I have - but it doesn't make me feel any better.

BEGGAR

It's not supposed to. It's supposed to make you feel worse.

MIRIAM

You're the expert.

JOSIAH

G-g-g-g-good morning, sir.

The BEGGAR and MIRIAM turn to find JOSEPHUS has entered. HE lights HIS glance upon MIRIAM. A long, uncomfortable pause ensues as JOSEPHUS looks HER over with a cold, unceasing stare. HE then raises HIS finger with majestic command and beckons

BEGGAR

(Sotto voce, to MIRIAM.)
Told you.

MIRIAM, chastened, walks to JOSEPHUS.

MIRIAM

Good morning, sir.

JOSEPHUS

Good morning, you say.

MIRIAM

Yes. I do.

JOSEPHUS

Let us refrain from judging what type of morning it is just yet.

MIRIAM

Yes, sir.

JOSEPHUS

I will start by asking what you are doing on the temple grounds.

MIRIAM

I have come to pray, sir - to pray and give succor to the unfortunate. I know you have seen me before, bringing my basket of bread. I bake it myself and sell it on the streets - and what I cannot sell, I give to the needy. And where could I find anyone with great need than here?

JOSEPHUS considers HER warily. JOSIAH senses trouble for HER.

JOSIAH

It is t-t-true, excellency.

JOSIAH holds up the bread. JOSEPHUS smiles at HIM benevolently.

JOSEPHUS

Yes, Josiah - I see that.

JOSIAH

She was v-v-v-very k-kind.

JOSEPHUS

Oh, yes. I've heard of how kind she is.

JOSEPHUS smiles knowingly at MIRIAM and takes the basket from HER.

JOSEPHUS

You look wearied, so we will finish your charity.

MIRIAM

Thank you, sir.

JOSEPHUS

Besides, it is the Sabbath. God commands us to observe His Sabbath in all ways and all things.

MIRIAM

Of course, yes - and so I shall.

JOSEPHUS

Then do so and work no more today.

BEGGAR

What about tonight?

JOSEPHUS turns towards the BEGGAR and smiles curtly.

JOSEPHUS

You know this woman, I take it.

BEGGAR

I've spoken with her a few times.

JOSEPHUS

I see. What exactly do you say to her?

BEGGAR

Hello.

JOSEPHUS

Is that it?

BEGGAR

No. I also say "goodbye." It's the gentleman in me.

JOSEPHUS

And between the one and the other?

BEGGAR

Oh, passing comments on the weather. It's been so hot over the past few months, you know.

(To MIRIAM.)

Isn't that right, my dear?

MIRIAM glares back at HIM.

JOSEPHUS

(To MIRIAM.)

Hot, it has been - but not enough. It will be hotter still if you come back to this temple again. Take my advice and leave before anyone else recognizes you. You know the punishment for your sin - and it will be enforced. I will not spare you mercy, and that is justly so. The law is meant to be obeyed and be eternal, for the law is found in God Himself and, in Him, there is only obeisance and eternity. Remember this and do not assume

JOSEPHUS (CONT)

that God will turn a blind eye to what you are doing, for, if so, it may be the last thing you do.

(Handing back the basket.)

Go now.

MIRIAM nods and scurries out. JOSEPHUS glances suspiciously over at the BEGGAR, who grins wildly. JOSEPHUS then abruptly turns towards JOSIAH:

JOSEPHUS

You are quiet, Josiah.

JOSIAH

I am t-t-t-t-tired, sir.

JOSEPHUS

Don't worry. Next time you may make it.

BEGGAR

(Cheekily.)

And I, excellency?

JOSEPHUS

Next time, you may make it, as well - for whyever not? The Lord chooses, not you.

BEGGAR

(Indicating HIS legs.)

After thirty-six years, I can take a hint.

JOSEPHUS

Thirty-six?

BEGGAR

Thirty-eight.

JOSEPHUS

Yet, again, you remain.

BEGGAR

Ah, well, there's always hope, I figure.

JOSEPHUS

There always is, yes.

A LOUD YELL emerges from offstage. The BEGGAR, JOSEPHUS, and JOSIAH look in the direction of the sound. A moment later, MANASSEH rushes onstage, dragging MIRIAM behind HIM.

MANASSEH

Here she is, here she is!

MANASSEH drags MIRIAM over to JOSEPHUS
and throws HER down in front of HIM.

JOSEPHUS

Good morning, Manasseh - again.

MANASSEH

It wasn't even "good" the first time.

JOSEPHUS

Every morning given to us by God is good.

MANASSEH

(Indicating MIRIAM.)

Not for her, it isn't. This is the woman I was talking about.

JOSEPHUS

Indeed.

MANASSEH

To think - you condemn me as the sinner.

JOSEPHUS

(Looking at MIRIAM.)

We have already had a most candid conversation.

MANASSEH

Not candid enough, I'd say. I caught her, outside my inn,
talking to a man, who...

MIRIAM

I was offering my bread to him.

MANASSEH

Ah, so that's what they call it now!

JOSEPHUS

Tread carefully, Manasseh.

MANASSEH

Oh, no - not anymore! I will tread loud - good and loud - and
maybe then I'll be heard! I'll wake up God Himself, if I must,
to get a little justice here! I'm fed up with these damn beggars
and the trash they bring along with them. I won't have it! I
want this woman arrested. I want this woman condemned. I can
vouch for her crimes - and I have witnesses who will come
forward! Maybe a little stoning session will help others take
these holy walls seriously!

JOSIAH

N-n-n-n-n-no!

MIRIAM

I have done nothing!

JOSIAH

L-l-leave her a-l-lone!

JOSEPHUS

(To JOSIAH.)

Leave it be here, Josiah. This doesn't concern you.

MANASSEH

(To MIRIAM.)

You are disgusting!

MIRIAM

What have I done?

MANASSEH

Do you want a ledger sheet!?

JOSIAH

You v-v-v-villain!

The argument descends into a meaningless cacophony. MIRIAM, JOSIAH, and MANASSEH argue together in THEIR turn. JOSEPHUS stands by and watches THEM with a clear lack of amusement. The noise THEY make grows louder and louder. The BEGGAR, observing from afar, shakes HIS head and turns to us:

BEGGAR

Now, this is a fine thing. I've always thought people should mind their own business. Who cares if she walks the streets? Who cares if I can't? Just let us both bide our time as we see fit - that's all. It makes things nice that way - nice and simple. Don't disturb something if it works for someone else. It's a waste of time - yours and mine and His.

The BEGGAR distinctly glances Heavenwards, then returns to us and nods at HIS legs:

BEGGAR

And this? This works for me - always has. It's simple that way - nice and simple.

Just then, the BEGGAR notices something - or someone? - in the near distance. A moment later, a LARGE SHADOW falls upon the BEGGAR. It is the SHADOW of a man in a light cloak. The figure is facing the BEGGAR and just staring at HIM. The

BEGGAR stares resolutely back with an amused curiosity - and, eventually, HE decides to speak:

BEGGAR

Hello there.

The SHADOW doesn't move. The BEGGAR extends HIS hand for some coins.

BEGGAR

Help a poor cripple, sir?

The SHADOW doesn't move. The BEGGAR waits for a response - waits and waits and waits - but since none comes:

BEGGAR

What? Cat got your tongue?

The SHADOW still doesn't move. The BEGGAR waits again - waits and waits and waits - until:

BEGGAR

Well, now - at least I can talk.

The SHADOW still doesn't move. The BEGGAR ponders HIM for a moment and then has an epiphany of sorts:

BEGGAR

Ah, I know! You can't talk, can you? That explains it. I should have recognized you. You and me, we're brothers, in an odd sort of way. You've come here to be cured just like the rest of us. You've come here to dunk your head in the water so that it'll finally say something. Well, good for you. Thing is, you may not like what it says... and then what? You would have been better off where you started, wouldn't you?

The SHADOW still doesn't move. The BEGGAR waits a moment or two - and then gives up. HE scoffs dismissively and turns away - but, just when HE does so, a LOUD and CLEAR VOICE sounds from the SHADOW as if coming from all sides of the stage:

VOICE

Do you want to be made well?

The BEGGAR turns, surprised, and looks back at the SHADOW. HE can't help but

grin a little, but then HE retracts HIS grin.

BEGGAR

Oh, yes, sir - but, you see, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up - and, if I do get there, someone always goes in before me.

The BEGGAR puts on a sad face and slowly reaches out HIS hands again for coins. The SHADOW stays motionless for a moment. Slowly, again, a long object rises up before the SHADOW. It is an arm pointed forcefully in the direction of the BEGGAR. The BEGGAR seems to treat this with a certain sense of unease and trepidation. Why, we don't know - but we can sense HIS fear. The SHADOW stays in its position for a moment - and then says commandingly:

VOICE

Pick up your mat - and walk.

The BEGGAR looks at the SHADOW for a moment - unsure what to do, unsure what to say - but, before HE can contemplate either, some force suddenly propels HIM upward. It is not that the BEGGAR's legs raise HIS torso, but rather that HIS torso is pulled, as if hidden strings from Heaven have compelled HIS ascendance. The rise is therefore clumsy and awkward - and no one feels it more so than the BEGGAR himself. HIS face betrays complete, utter shock as, before HE knows it, HE is standing upright before the SHADOW. The BEGGAR stares dumbfounded at the SHADOW for a moment.

A moment later, a LOUD SCREAM sounds from someplace offstage - someplace close enough for another person to see what has happened. The scream is followed by a similar string of ASTONISHED VOICES that come sounding one after the other like distant trumpets. This noise compels MIRIAM, JOSIAH, and MANASSEH to cease their arguing and turn in the direction of the BEGGAR. JOSEPHUS has turned, too, but turned before the others, even before the first scream, as if some

inner voice told HIM to witness a sight that HIS eyes were meant to see.

By now, the stage is silent - silent with a pregnant type of shock. The BEGGAR is standing upright in astonishment. HE turns and finds the others staring at HIM. JOSEPHUS stares back with a noncommittal expression that seems all the more unsettling by the fact that it is impossible to read.

MIRIAM

Oh, dear God!

MANASSEH

What is this?

JOSIAH

He's st-st-st-st...

JOSEPHUS

Standing.

MIRIAM

Standing.

BEGGAR

(To us, shocked.)
Standing.

The BEGGAR looks upon HIS legs for a moment and then looks back at the CROWD. HE is bereft for an explanation and helpless in the bright light of attention. HE makes to say something and gestures vaguely towards the location of the SHADOW - but no. The SHADOW is gone. The BEGGAR stares at the spot where the SHADOW used to stand. The LIGHTS begin to fall on everything save the BEGGAR. HE peers out at us with a mixture of perplexity and annoyance.

BEGGAR

When it all happened, I asked myself "what is the meaning of this?" Then I asked: "Well, what is the meaning of anything?" What does it mean to be lame? What does it mean not to be? There is no meaning, I tell you. There are only facts - one way or the other. You're lame or you're not - one way or the other. You have people here who would search and search for the "meaning" behind things till the day they die - and only then do they find an answer. They stare out at a whole lot of dark nothing and

BEGGAR (CONT)

find there wasn't anything behind it after all. I should know - I've been crippled for thirty-two years.

By now, the LIGHTS have fallen in full on everything but the BEGGAR. HE thinks for a moment in silence. What HE is thinking remains a mystery - likely to HIMSELF - since HE betrays no inner thoughts in HIS expression. There seems to be some mental debate going on that we cannot see - but, either way, HE shakes it out of HIS skull and sighs HIS way back to reality.

BEGGAR

Anyway, there is and was no meaning to this - not that I ever could see. I remember taking a moment even to register what had happened. There I was, standing like a statue for all the world to gawk at. At least, it seemed like all the world at the time. It's quite awkward, you know, with all those eyes on you like that. I've never been one to like attention - not me. It's better to be creeping along, like a cricket in the grass. You come out when you're good and ready - and only then - but this... well, this is just awkward.

The BEGGAR frowns to HIMSELF and then faces down at HIS legs. HE looks at them a good, long moment. HE then slowly wags HIS legs and grimaces in pain. HE takes a few steps - and then, suddenly, HE stops and looks around HIM. It's almost as if HE is beginning to wonder where HE should go and what HE should do when HE gets there. The BEGGAR continues to ponder and then turns back to us, lost:

BEGGAR

After I was pulled up onto my feet, it seemed natural to use them - so that's what I did. I felt some impulse, you see - although, from where, I don't know. I don't think it matters either, because, either way, it was there. So I walked - walked clear out of the temple... down one street... down another... No particular reason, that is, because my feet had a mind of their own. I guess they just wanted to get away. That's a bit hard, mind you, when you want to get away from everything. You can't manage that, no matter how many feet you have. It took me a bit to figure that out, but I did, so, after a few days, about a week I think, I came back to the temple. I couldn't help it, because... well... it was home, wasn't it?

The LIGHTS rise again on the stage. A few days have passed since the BEGGAR

has begun to walk. HE stops for a moment and looks at the Temple before HIM. A certain nostalgia - is that the word? - runs through HIS mind. The BEGGAR grins to himself and then suddenly grabs HIS leg. A sharp pain has shot up HIS side. HE holds HIS leg for a moment and grabs a nearby column to steady HIMSELF. HE then rubs HIS leg gently, before smiling sheepishly at us:

BEGGAR

Growing pains, perhaps - or a bad case of pins and needles. My legs burn - oh, yes - ever since... Well, you know. I guess it's from two many years of lying down. They string me like a little knife were picking away at my calves. It's all I can do to lie down sometimes and keep still.

(To God.)

You must think You're very funny.

MANASSEH comes rushing onstage in yet another frenzy. HE spies the BEGGAR nearby and instantly freezes. HIS face betrays pure revulsion. The BEGGAR limply stares back.

MANASSEH

You.

BEGGAR

I.

MANASSEH

My God, you're still here.

BEGGAR

If I am not lame, you certainly are not blind.

MANASSEH

Looking at you, I'd rather well be. You can walk now, can't you?

BEGGAR

Walk? Oh, yes. I can walk... and skip... and run... and even jump. Why, there's no limit to my movements now. I can even dance, do you know that? Yes, I can dance - although I don't know how - but, still, I can. I don't suppose you would be interested in teaching me?

MANASSEH

No.

BEGGAR

Pity.

MANASSEH

If you can walk, why the hell are you here?

BEGGAR

Well now, I might as well ask you the same thing.

MANASSEH

I'm here to do what I always do - beg. You, you don't have anything else to beg for now.

BEGGAR

Oh, well - you know what they say about old habits. I've been crippled for thirty-four years.

MANASSEH

Thirty-four?

BEGGAR

Thirty-two. Besides, I'm the sentimental type.

MANASSEH

What does that have to do with it?

BEGGAR

Nothing - besides everything. I've only spent every day in this temple for the past decade or so. It's my home, you see, and I can't just part with her.

(A beat.)

Don't you ever miss your home, sir?

MANASSEH

I miss my guests.

MANASSEH glares and begins to move towards the chamber door at the opposite side of the stage.

BEGGAR

He's busy.

MANASSEH freezes and slowly turns.

BEGGAR

Josephus, that is.

MANASSEH just stares.

BEGGAR

You were going to see him, weren't you?

MANASSEH

What's it to you?

BEGGAR

Oh, nothing at all! Far be it for me to pry or anything. I just thought I'd let you know he's busy.

MANASSEH

How would you know?

BEGGAR

How would you not?

MANASSEH thinks a moment and then angrily rushes towards the chamber door - yet again:

BEGGAR

Far enough, sir. You can knock and see for yourself. He won't be too pleased with you. I'll tell him I told you that he was busy and, oh, will he be angry.

MANASSEH

This is rubbish.

BEGGAR

Oh, no, sir - I swear. You see, I'm waiting to see him, too.

JOSEPHUS

I can't believe that.

BEGGAR

You can, if you try.

MANASSEH

Well, whatever it is, it can wait.

BEGGAR

Actually, sir, he asked to see me personally - so, whatever it is, it can't.

MANASSEH

He asked to see you?

BEGGAR

I said "me," didn't I?

MANASSEH

Yes, but I don't believe you.

BEGGAR

That's fine, sir. Maybe you should ask him, then.

The BEGGAR nods in the direction of the chamber door. JOSEPHUS has opened the door and is standing in the doorway.

JOSEPHUS

Good afternoon, Manasseh.

MANASSEH

Good afternoon, Josephus.

JOSEPHUS

I'm glad you agree.

MANASSEH

Within reason. I have a complaint.

JOSEPHUS

When will you not have complaints, Manasseh?

MANASSEH

After I'm dead.

JOSEPHUS

I suspect, even then, we will hear from you - but, for now, you must wait.

(Looking knowingly towards the BEGGAR.)

I have a meeting.

MANASSEH

Ah - a minute with the miracle, eh?

JOSEPHUS

I would keep that verdict to yourself.

MANASSEH

What do you mean by that?

JOSEPHUS

What do you think I mean?

MANASSEH

Oh, for God's sake...

JOSEPHUS

For God's sake especially.

MANASSEH

I don't have time for riddles!

JOSEPHUS

And I don't have time for fictions - so give me none.

JOSEPHUS turns away from MANASSEH and abruptly gestures towards the BEGGAR.

JOSEPHUS

Come, we shall talk.