



Learn English Through Stories.

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu.**

<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>

THIRTY HOURS
WITH A
CORPSE
AND OTHER TALES OF THE GRAND GUIGNOL



MAURICE LEVEL • INTRODUCED AND EDITED BY S. T. JOSHI

Illusion

By Maurice Level

BLUE WITH cold, clutching at the bottom of his pockets the few pence he had earned that morning by opening and shutting the doors of cabs, his head bent toward his shoulder in an attempt to get some shelter from the biting wind, the beggar moved among the hurrying crowd, too weary to accost, too benumbed to risk holding out a bare hand.

Blown sideways in powdery flakes, the snow caught in his beard, or melted on his neck. He did not notice it, for he was lost in a dream.

“If I were rich, just for an hour . . . I’d have a carriage . . .”

He stopped, thought for a moment, shook his head, and asked himself:
“And what else? . . .”

Visions of various kinds of luxury passed through his mind. But every time he formulated a wish, he shrugged his shoulders.

“No, that’s not it . . . Is it then so difficult to get just one minute of real happiness? . . .”

As he trudged along in this way he saw another beggar who was shivering under the protecting doorway of a house, his features drawn, his hand outstretched, and his voice so weak it was lost in the noises of the street as he droned:

“Help, if you please . . . Please help me . . .”

Close by him sat a dog, a poor bedraggled mongrel that trembled as it barked, feebly trying to wag its tail. He stopped. At the sight of this other brother in affliction, the dog yelped a little louder, rubbing its nose against him.

He looked with attention at the beggar, at his rags, his gaping shoes, his poor hands blue with cold, at the set, livid face with closed eyes, at the grey placard on his breast which bore the one word: “Blind.”

Feeling that a man had stopped before him, the blind man took up his plaintive cry:

“Help, Monsieur . . . Pity the poor blind . . .”

The beggar stood motionless. The passersby quickened their steps, turning their heads away. A woman loaded with furs and followed by a servant in livery who held an umbrella over her came out of the door of the house and walking quickly on the tips of her toes as she protected her mouth with her muff, was swallowed up in her carriage.

The blind man kept on murmuring his monotonous appeal:
“Help . . . Please spare me a copper . . .”

But no one paid any attention to him. After a time the beggar took some coppers from his pocket and held them out. Seeing the action the dog barked with pleasure. The blind man closed his trembling fingers on the halfpence and said:

“Thank you, Monsieur . . . May God reward you . . .”

Hearing himself addressed as “Monsieur,” the beggar was on the point of replying:

“I’m not ‘Monsieur,’ mate. I’m just another poor devil as miserable as yourself . . .”

But he restrained himself, and knowing only too well how the poor are spoken to, answered:

“It is very little, my poor fellow . . .”

“You are very kind, Monsieur . . . it is so cold, and you must have taken your hands out of your pockets for me. It is bad weather for the infirm . . . If people only knew . . .”

A great pity welled up in the heart of the beggar as he muttered: “I know . . . I know . . .”

Then, forgetting his own poverty in the face of this greater affliction, he asked:

“Were you born blind?”

“No . . . it came as I grew old . . . At the hospital they told me that it was caused by age . . . cataract, they called it, I think . . . But I know better . . . I know that it wasn’t only age that brought it . . . I have had too many misfortunes . . . I have shed too many tears . . .”

“You have had a great deal of trouble?”

“Oh, Monsieur! . . . In one year I lost my wife, my daughter, and my two sons . . . All that I loved . . . all I had to love me. I almost died myself, but gradually I began to get better . . . But I wasn’t able to work anymore . . . Then it was poverty . . . destitution . . . Some days I don’t have anything to eat at all. I’ve had nothing since yesterday but a crust of bread, and I gave half to my dog . . . With the money you gave me, I shall get some more for tonight and tomorrow.”

As he listened the beggar turned over the coppers in his pocket. He was trying to count them, distinguishing by touch the difference between the pence and halfpence. He had elevenpence-halfpenny. He said:

“Come with me. It’s too cold here. I will see that you have something to eat.”

The blind man reddened with pleasure, stammering:

“Oh, Monsieur . . . you are too kind . . .”

“Come . . .”

Careful that the other should not feel how wet his own clothes were, how thin, he took him by the arm, and they set off. The dog, its head up, its ears cocked, led the way through the people, pulling sharply at its chain when they crossed a road where there was traffic. They walked on like this for a long time, finally stopping before a little restaurant in a back street.

The beggar opened the door and said to the blind man:

“Come in . . .”

Choosing a table near the stove, he made him sit down and took a chair near him.

Some workmen, all of them silent, were hungrily emptying the small thick plates before them. The blind man took the lead off his dog and held his hands out to the fire, sighing:

“It’s very comfortable here . . .”

The beggar called the girl who was waiting and ordered some soup and boiled beef.

She asked:

“And what will you have?”

“Nothing.”

When the soup, which smelled very appetizing, and the meat were before him, the blind man began to eat slowly and in silence. The beggar watched him, cutting little bits of bread that he held under the table to the dog. The soup and meat finished, he said:

“Have something to drink. It will put some strength into your legs.” Later, he called the servant:

“How much?”

“Tenpence-halfpenny.”

He paid, leaving the remaining penny for the girl, and helped his companion to rise. When they were back in the street, he asked:

“Do you live far from here?”

“Where are we?”

“Near St. Lazare station.”

“Far enough. I sleep in a shed on the other side of the river.”

“I’ll go part of the way with you.”

The blind man kept on thanking him. He replied:

“No . . . no . . . it’s not worth mentioning . . .”

Without knowing why, he felt happy, supremely happy, happier than he ever remembered feeling. As he walked along, lost in dreamy thoughts, he forgot that he himself had been without food since yesterday, that he had no place to sleep in that night; he forgot his miseries, his rags, that he was a beggar.

From time to time he said gently to the blind man:

“Am I going too quickly? Are you very tired?”

The blind man, humble and grateful, answered:

“No . . . oh, no, Monsieur . . .”

He smiled, happy to hear himself addressed in that way, soothed alike by the illusion he was giving the other and his own odd sensation of being a rich, charitable person . . .

On the quay, feeling the dampness of the air from the river, the blind man said:

“Now I can find my way alone. I have my dog.”

“Yes, I will say goodbye,” replied the beggar in a solemn voice.

For a strange thought had taken possession of him: the illusion that he had so often and so ardently desired, had it not become a reality? Had he not at last enjoyed the sensation of perfect happiness? Had not this last hour given him more joy than any of his wildest dreams of wealth and rich food and love? This blind man had no suspicion that he had been leaning on the arm of a beggar as poor as himself . . . had he not been able to believe himself rich, and could he hope ever again to feel the deep, unmixed joy of tonight?

But the elation did not last long. Suddenly realities came back. He said a second time:

“Yes . . . I will leave you now.”

They had reached the middle of the bridge. He stopped, felt once more in his pockets to see if by any chance a halfpenny remained there. Not one . . .

He grasped the blind man's hand, pressed it warmly, while the other said:

"Thank you once again, Monsieur. Will you tell me your name so that I can pray for you?"

"It's not worthwhile. Hurry out of the cold. It is I who am very happy.

Goodbye . . ."

He went a little way back, stopped, looked fixedly at the dark expanse of water below him, and once again in a louder voice said:

"Goodbye . . ."

Then suddenly he leaped up on the parapet . . .

There was a great splash . . . then cries of "Help!" . . . "Run to the bank of the river!"

Pushed roughly about by the people who rushed up, the blind man cried:

"What is it? What has happened?"

A street boy who had almost knocked him over shouted without stopping:

"A beggar has made a hole in the water."

With a weary gesture he shrugged his shoulders, murmuring: "He at least had the courage, he had! . . ."

Then, touching his dog with the toe of his boot, he drudged on, tapping the ground with his stick, his face turned up to the sky, his back bent . . . without knowing . . .