Many years ago, there lived a woman whom everyone called Auntie Lily. She was Auntie by blood to half the county and Auntie to the other half by friendship. As she liked to say, “There’s a bit of Heaven in each of us.” As a result, she was always helping people out.

Because of her many kind acts, she knew so many people that she couldn’t go ten steps without meeting someone who wanted to chat. So it would take her half the day to go to the village well and back to her home.

Eventually, though, she helped so many people that she had no more money. She had to sell her fields and even her house to her neighbor, a rich old woman. “If you’d helped yourself instead of others, you wouldn’t have to do this,” the neighbor said smugly. “Where are all those other people when you need them?”

“That isn’t why I helped them,” Auntie Lily said firmly. She wound up having to pay rent for the house she had once owned. She supported herself by her embroidery; but since her eyes were going bad, she could not do very much.

One day an old beggar entered the village. He was a ragbag of a man—a trash heap, a walking pig wallow. It was impossible to tell what color or what shape his clothes had once been, and his hair was as muddy and matted as a bird’s nest. As he shuffled through the village gates, he called out, “Water for my feet. Please, water for my feet. One little bowl of water—that’s all I ask.”
Everyone ignored him, pretending to concentrate on their chores instead. One man went on replacing the shaft of his hoe. A woman swept her courtyard. Another woman fed her hens.

The beggar went to each in turn, but they all showed their backs to him.

After calling out a little while longer, the beggar went to the nearest home, which happened to belong to the rich old woman. When he banged at her door, he left the dirty outline of his knuckles on the clean wood. And when the rich woman opened her door, his smell nearly took her breath away.

Now it so happened that she had been chopping vegetables when the beggar had knocked. When the beggar repeated his request, she raised her cleaver menacingly. “What good would one bowl of water be? You’d need a whole river to wash you clean. Go away.”

“A thousand pardons,” the old beggar said, and shambled on to the next house.

Though Auntie Lily had to hold her nose, she asked politely, “Yes?”

“I’d like a bowl of water to wash my feet.” And the beggar pointed one grimy finger toward them.

Her rich neighbor had stayed in her doorway to watch the beggar. She scolded Auntie Lily now. “It’s all your fault those beggars come into the village. They know they can count on a free meal.”

It was an old debate between them, so Auntie Lily simply said, “Any of us can have bad luck.”

“Garbage,” the rich old woman declared, “is garbage. They must have done something bad, or Heaven wouldn’t have let them become beggars.”

Auntie Lily turned to the beggar. “I may be joining you on the road someday. Wait here.”

Much to the neighbor’s distress, Auntie Lily went inside and poured water from a large jar in her kitchen into a bucket. Carrying it in both hands, she brought it outside to the beggar and set it down.

The beggar stood on one leg, just like a crane, while he washed one callused, leathery sole over the bucket. “You can put mud on any other part of me, but if my feet are clean, then I feel clean.”

As he fussily continued to cleanse his feet, Auntie Lily asked kindly, “Are you hungry? I don’t have much, but what I have I’m willing to share.”

The beggar shook his head. “I’ve stayed longer in this village than I have in any other. Heaven is my roof, and the whole world my house.”

Auntie Lily stared at him, wondering what she would look like after a few years on the road. “Are you very tired? Have you been on the road for very long?”
“No, the road is on me,” the beggar said, and held up his hands from his dirty sides. “But thank you. You’re the first person to ask. And you’re the first person to give me some water. So place the bucket of water by your bed tonight and do not look into it till tomorrow morning.”

As the beggar shuffled out of the village again, Auntie Lily stared down doubtfully at the bucket of what was now muddy water. Then, even though she felt foolish, she picked it up again.

“You’re not really going to take that scummy water inside?” laughed the rich neighbor. “It’ll probably breed mosquitoes.”

“It seemed important to him,” she answered. “I’ll humor him.”

“Humoring people,” snapped the neighbor, “has got you one step from begging yourself.”

However, Auntie Lily carried the bucket inside anyway. Setting it down near her sleeping mat, she covered the mouth of the bucket with an old, cracked plate so she wouldn’t peek into it by mistake, and then she got so caught up in embroidering a pair of slippers that she forgot all about the beggar and his bucket of water.

She sewed until twilight, when it was too dark to use her needle. Then, because she had no money for oil or candles, she went to sleep.

The next morning Auntie Lily rose and stretched the aches out of her back. She sighed. “The older I get, the harder it is to get up in the morning.”

Predict

Reread lines 66–69. From what the beggar has said about Auntie Lily, what kind of thing do you predict will happen if she follows his instructions?

*humor* (hyoo’mar) v. to give in to the wishes of
She was always saying something like that, but she had never stayed on her sleeping mat—even when she was sick. Thinking of all that day’s chores, she decided to water the herbs she had growing on one side of her house.

Her eyes fell upon the beggar’s bucket with its covering plate. “No sense using fresh water when that will do as well. After all, dirt’s dirt to a plant.”

Squatting down, she picked up the bucket and was surprised at how heavy it was. “I must have filled it fuller than I thought,” she grunted. She staggered out of the house and over to the side where rows of little green herbs grew. “Here you go,” she said to her plants. “Drink deep.”

Taking off the plate, she upended the bucket; but instead of muddy brown water, there was a flash of reflected light and a clinking sound as gold coins rained down upon her plants.

Auntie Lily set the bucket down hastily and crouched, not trusting her weak eyes. However, where some of her herbs had been, there was now a small mound of gold coins. She squinted in disbelief and rubbed her aching eyes and stared again; but the gold was still there.

She turned to the bucket. There was even more gold inside. Scooping up coins by the handful, she freed her little plants and made sure that the stalks weren’t too bent.

Then she sat gazing at her bucket full of gold until a farmer walked by.

“She must be dreaming,” she called to him.

The farmer yawned and came over with his hoe over his shoulder.

“I wish I were dreaming, because that would mean I’m still in bed instead of having to go off to work.”

Auntie Lily gathered up a handful of gold coins and let it fall in a tinkling, golden shower back into the bucket. “And this is real?”

The farmer’s jaw dropped. He picked up one coin with his free hand and bit into it. He flipped it back in with the other coins. “It’s as real as me, Auntie. But where did you ever get that?”

So Auntie Lily told him. And as others woke up and stepped outside, Auntie told them as well, for she still could not believe her luck and wanted them to confirm that the gold was truly gold. In no time at all, there was a small crowd around her.

If the bucket had been filled with ordinary copper cash, that would have been more money than any of them had ever seen. In their wildest dreams, they had never expected to see that much gold. Auntie Lily stared at the bucket uncomfortably. “I keep thinking it’s going to disappear the next moment.”

---

1. *bit into it*: Gold is soft, so biting it is a way of testing its authenticity.
The farmer, who had been standing there all this time, shook his head. “If it hasn’t disappeared by now, I don’t think it will. What are you going to do with it, Auntie?”

Auntie Lily stared at the bucket, and suddenly she came to a decision. Stretching out a hand, she picked up a gold coin. “I’m going to buy back my house, and I’m going to get back my land.”

The farmer knew the fields. “Those old things? You could buy a valley full of prime land with half that bucket. And a palace with the other half.”

“I want what I sweated for.” Asking the farmer to guard her bucket, Auntie Lily closed her hand around the gold coin. Then, as the crowd parted before her, she made her way over to her neighbor.

Now the rich old woman liked to sleep late; but all the noise had woken her up, so she was just getting dressed when Auntie knocked. The old woman yanked her door open as she buttoned the last button of her coat. “Who started the riot? Can’t a person get a good night’s sleep?”

With some satisfaction, Auntie Lily held up the gold coin. “Will this buy back my house and land?”

“Where did you get that?” the old woman demanded.

“Will it buy them back?” Auntie Lily repeated.

The rich old woman snatched the coin out of Auntie Lily’s hand and bit into it just as the farmer had. “It’s real,” the old woman said in astonishment.

“Will it?” Auntie asked again.

“Yes, yes, yes,” the old woman said crabily. “But where did you ever get that much gold?”

When Auntie Lily told her the story and showed her the bucket of gold, the rich old woman stood moving her mouth like a fish out of water. Clasping her hands together, she shut her eyes and moaned in genuine pain. “And I sent him away. What a fool I am. What a fool.” And the old woman beat her head with her fists.

That very afternoon, the beggar—the ragbag, the trash heap, the walking pig wallow—shuffled once more through the village gates with feet as dirty as before. As he went, he croaked, “Water for my feet. Please, water for my feet. One little bowl of water—that’s all I ask.”

This time, people dropped whatever they were doing when they heard his plea. Hoes, brooms, and pots were flung down, hens and pigs were kicked out of the way as everyone hurried to fill a bucket with water. There was a small riot by the village well as everyone fought to get water at the same time. Still others rushed out with buckets filled from the jars in their houses.
“Here, use my water,” one man shouted, holding up a tub.

A woman shoved in front of him with a bucket in her arms. “No, no, use mine. It’s purer.”

They surrounded the old beggar, pleading with him to use their water, and in the process of jostling one another, they splashed a good deal of water on one another and came perilously close to drowning the beggar. The rich old woman, Auntie Lily’s neighbor, charged to the rescue.

“Out of the way, you vultures,” the rich old woman roared. “You’re going to trample him.” Using her elbows, her feet, and in one case even her teeth, the old woman fought her way through the mob.

No longer caring if she soiled her hands, the old woman seized the beggar by the arm. “This way, you poor, misunderstood creature.”

Fighting off her neighbors with one hand and keeping her grip on the beggar with the other, the old woman hauled him inside her house. Barring the door against the rest of the village, she ignored all the fists and feet thumping on her door and all the shouts.

“I really wasn’t myself yesterday, because I had been up the night before tending a sick friend. This is what I meant to do.” She fetched a fresh new towel and an even newer bucket and forced the beggar to wash his feet.

When he was done, he handed her the now filthy towel. “Dirt’s dirt, and garbage is garbage,” he said.

However, the greedy old woman didn’t recognize her own words. She was too busy trying to remember what else Auntie Lily had done.

“Won’t you have something to eat? Have you traveled very far? Are you tired?” she asked, all in the same breath.

The old beggar went to the door and waited patiently while she unbared it. As he shuffled outside, he instructed her to leave the bucket of water by her bed but not to look into it until the morning.

That night, the greedy old woman couldn’t sleep as she imagined the heap of shiny gold that would be waiting for her tomorrow. She waited impatiently for the sun to rise and got up as soon as she heard the first rooster crow.

Hurrying to the bucket, she plunged her hands inside expecting to bring up handfuls of gold. Instead, she gave a cry as dozens of little things bit her, for the bucket was filled not with gold but with snakes, lizards, and ants.

The greedy old woman fell sick—some said from her bites, some claimed from sheer frustration. Auntie Lily herself came to nurse her neighbor. “Take this to heart: Kindness comes with no price.”

The old woman was so ashamed that she did, indeed, take the lesson to heart. Though she remained sick, she was kind to whoever came to her door.
One day, a leper came into the village. Everyone hid for fear of the terrible disease. Doors slammed and shutters banged down over windows, and soon the village seemed deserted.

Only Auntie Lily and her neighbor stepped out of their houses. “Are you hungry?” Auntie Lily asked. “Are you thirsty?” the neighbor asked. “I’ll make you a cup of tea.” The leper thanked Auntie Lily and then turned to the neighbor as if to express his gratitude as well; but he stopped and studied her. “You’re looking poorly, my dear woman. Can I help?”

With a tired smile, the rich old woman explained what had happened. When she was finished, the leper stood thoughtfully for a moment. “You’re not the same woman as before: You’re as kind as Auntie Lily, and you aren’t greedy anymore. So take this humble gift from my brother, the old beggar.”

With that, the leper limped out of the village; and as he left, the illness fell away from the old woman like an old, discarded cloak. But though the old woman was healthy again, she stayed as kind as Auntie Lily and used her own money as well and wisely as Auntie Lily used the waters of gold.

---

2. leper: a person suffering from the infectious disease of leprosy, which can result in bodily deformities.