

## “Scaro the Great”

By John Demapan

On a hot afternoon at a sidewalk beside a steady buzz of scrambling automobiles, Jack Lever, the town's homeless nomad, began his daily expedition to the wealthy hamlet of Coral Gables. In his hand was a plastic neon cup, his favorite in fact, that he had acquired most fortunately while rummaging in twilight through one of the area's upper-class garbage bins. It had a vibrant orange color very much like sidewalk cones found at construction sites. With it, he had earned fifty dollars two weeks ago when he had approached a well-to-do couple in their early thirties. He was 49 and today was his birthday in which he hoped today's trip would afford him the luxury of buying his favorite illegal substance “crack”. “Gollum”, as he was commonly called by civilized society, had wandered far from his life's goal of becoming a filthy rich parishioner when he made the decision to embezzle God's money and have relations with a minor. He had been fired immediately, sent to prison, disowned, and if he happened to die today, God would have most certainly cast his spirit into the lake of fire. He was one of the seeds in the Bible that was tossed in thorny grounds except he had been tossed repeatedly for 22 years. Crack could do no harm to this man; in fact, it was anesthesia to help him endure the harsh climate of his pitiful existence. No, there was really nothing to look forward to in his life, but Jack pressed on in his tattered wardrobe and bare feet.

On his journey, he most likely would find pennies on the ground in which he would place into his precious cup. Any passerby was a victim to his shambled state and would feel an awkward sense of civic responsibility for taking care of such a poor unfortunate man. Jack, because of years of experience in the field, had developed a way of making people feel worse about themselves if they even had the slightest notion of leaving his sight without dispensing any loose change into his bright orange coffer. He would shake his cup as if it were a child's rattle in order to appeal to society's good nature; and if that failed, he would start talking. Either way, no noncontributing bystander was safe from the unavoidable guilt trip and impending profanity.

Today was different though, and he noticed that as he arrived at his favorite spot near the local bookshop. Unlike yesterday, everyone around him seemed to be in a charitable spirit. People were dropping coins in his cup left and right and it was getting heavy and hard to shake.

This pleased Jack and he began to brighten like an incandescent bulb. “It ain’t even Christmas,” he said quite jovially, “I will be able to buy at least three bags with these.”

As he looked around, he noticed most of his patrons coming from the direction of the bookstore. “That’s odd,” he concluded, “I never met a man alive who was good for no reason.” Without a second thought, he marched toward the alleged source of kindness and, lo and behold, his suspicions were confirmed.

There above the entrance door hung a banner with the name “Scaro the Great” in big bold letters. Apparently, there was some sort of event going on; and Curious Jack was among the noninformed bracket. Unable to withhold his enthusiasm, Jack formed an oval with his soot-covered hands, sort of like binoculars, and pressed them firmly against the store window. Peering in, Jack could discern a bearded old man with a tall blue cone cap autographing what most likely was a book. “He’s an author,” Jack surmised, “I must meet him.”

Without any delay, he opened the door and proceeded in the direction of his mission. Flies, which were rare creatures around these parts, seemed to be making a comeback as soon as Jack set his foot in the door.

“Egad, what is that atrocious smell?!” exclaimed an elderly gentleman in line to meet Scaro.

“It smells like a thousand skunks,” answered another.

“Open the door, I can’t breathe,” uttered a third.

The store manager, disturbed over the big scene, recognized the perpetrator and confronted him, “Gollum, I told you, no hanging around the shop. You are scaring away my customers!” Then glancing at the smudge on his glass windows, he erupted, “Oh, my God, what sacrilege!”

“Please sir,” said Jack. “I won’t take none of your time. I just wanted to meet the author. That’s all.”

Holding his nostrils firmly with his right hand, the store manager rebutted, “No! You clean that mess on my window this instance or I’m going to call the cops. I’m tired of you people coming into my store. Last time, I had to get the carpets cleaned and everything. Why don’t you get a real job like everybody else instead of bothering good citizens such as ourselves with your problems? If you had a right state of mind, you’d go up to the shelter instead of hanging around here filling our nice establishment with that stench!”

Drooping his head, Jack walked out the store and sat down on one of the sidewalk benches. "I'm so stupid," he told himself. "Look at me; I am an embarrassment to the community." As he said this, a fly flew on his hand and he began talk to it, "Oh, little fly, you are my truest friend. You didn't care what state I'm in. You loved me for me."

Strangely it was true. Since Jack became a bum, flies have always followed him. They never minded his smell the least bit. They did not care if he was rich or poor, they just stuck by him. It was not until a mysterious shadow cast before him and frightened his little winged friend away. "You shouldn't trust flies as your companions," said the old man with the blue cap. "They only like you because you smell like the dump. When you die, they won't be the one caring for you. They'll be the one's laying eggs in you and eating you."

Jack was about to get up to introduce himself but the old man continued in his deep voice, "No need to stand up, my boy. I know why you came to the book store. I'm sorry for what happened to you back there. It's a shame that that had to happen to you. To be a beggar is an abomination. I, too, was once a beggar; I, too, roamed the streets; and I, too, overcame. What that man said is the darn awful truth. Whether you choose to believe it or not, that is your decision."

Then the old man, dipping his hand to Jack's coffer, extracted a penny and closed it in his hand. When he slowly opened it, there was a hundred dollar bill. "But how?" gasped Jack in disbelief.

"I am a sorcerer. I am Scaro. For me, money is easy. Tell me now. Say the words that your heart desires. What is it that you really want?"

"I want to learn how to make money," said Jack.

"What will you give?" said Scaro staring into Jack's eyes.

It was strange for Jack now. Having seen what the wizard could do with a penny, he had the sudden urge to give Scaro all his coins.

"Yes," said Scaro taking the coins. "This will suffice. In the count of three, I want you to close your eyes. 1...2...3...Close. Stretch out your palm." With a few incantations, Scaro slipped a piece of paper into Jack's hand and instructed him not to open his hand for four hours.

"If you open your hand before that time, this paper will just remain a piece of paper. If however, you manage to complete this task, it will become your fortune. Now open your eyes."

Jack did as he was told and the old man with a smile bid the stranger goodbye. Jack looked at his clenched fist and wondered for a moment what fortune could possibly await him after the day's end. He imagined the mansions and the yachts he would possess. He imagined his life returning to the way it was when he was rich and decadent. "No more peddling on the street corner for me," he said optimistically, "I'm going to be rich."

As the sun descended, a herd of cumulus nimbus clouds invaded the sapphire sky. A sound of thunder rolled and a torrent of rain began to pour upon the hamlet of Coral Gables. It was as if Mother Nature herself could no longer tolerate the offensive odor that emitted from this wretched wanderer and pitying all creatures large and small she took upon herself the duty to rectify the matter. In fact, Jack was one of those rare people who if lost at the woods, bears would not choose to eat him fearing salmonella. It so happened, that it was the first time in several months that Jack had taken a shower. The fact that he smelled so awful was no concern for him now. His biggest challenge was overcoming his curiosity. Jack had by this time held the paper in his hand for no longer than one hour and his hand was beginning to weaken. Not only was he exhausted, but he was drenched and very hungry. He had given Scaro his birthday money and was at this time regretting the fact that he ever did. He was also having a craving for his favorite medicine but since there was no way to obtain it now, he sat down and backed his head against a brick wall. "All my begging has been fruitless," he told himself. "I have nothing to show for."

No sooner than he said this, another homeless man sat beside him. "No luck, eh?" asked the wanderer.

"Nope."

"Well, that sucks," he said, stretching his hand to greet him. "The name's Rob."

"Jack," he responded.

"What's wrong with your hand, buddy?" asked Rob.

"I'm not supposed to open it until after 4 hours."

"Why?" asked Rob.

"A wizard told me not to."

"A wizard? That's the weirdest thing. A wizard came up to me two days ago. Dude, it's just a blank slip of paper."

Jack eyes began to redden. "No, you didn't hold it for four hours."

“Dude, there is no such thing as wizards. The guy was just pulling your leg. How much did you have?”

“I had a cup full of coins.”

“Dude, you’re stupid. Now you don’t have money and now you don’t have jack squat.”

Somehow when Rob said this, the words you don’t have jack squat kept reverberating in Jack’s mind. It was exactly the words Jack told himself twenty two years ago when he became a homeless bum.

“I am stupid,” Jack said as he stared into the gloomy street.

“Uh, I didn’t mean it that way,” said Rob. “You just probably didn’t know better.”

“I am,” said Jack. “I let everybody down—my whole family, the people who cared about me, the whole freakin’ town.”

“We can change it,” said Rob optimistically.

“I’m a failure,” Jack sobbed.

Rob then got up and smacked Jack in the face, “Listen, you’re not a failure! You can still take control of your life. Stop giving up, you sissy!”

“Why’d you have to hit me for?”

“I hate unhappy people. Let’s do something about this and find the wizard and get back our money!”

Jack then got up and smacked Rob in the back of his head.

“Ow, what was that for?”

“I hate violence,” Jack retorted.

The two homeless waifs began retracing where they last met the wizard. Jack told Rob that he had met the wizard across the street from the bookstore two hours ago and that if they were lucky, they both might be able to catch him. As the two hapless men scurried along the streets, their stomachs began to growl and their goals began to wane.

“I’m tired,” said Jack. “I want to eat.”

“You’re giving up already?”

“It’s so far, I just walked all the way here.”

“I know,” said Rob, “let’s go to Wendy’s and beg them to give us food.”

Unbeknownst to Jack, four hours had already elapsed since his meeting with Scaro. As the strangers finally came up to Wendy’s, Jack opened his palm to grab the door handle when the

small piece of paper slipped from his hand. Jack picked up the paper and read it, "Change your destiny."

Rob thinking that Jack abandoned the silly idea of wizards and magic, said, "I told you it was just a stupid piece of paper. That wizard jacked us."

Rob went in first and then Jack followed. As Rob hurried to the counter, Jack's eyes combed the room. On the wall beside the cashier near the employee of the month picture frame, Jack saw a wanted poster of a man that had an uncanny resemblance to his partner. Jack thought nothing of it until Rob pulled a gun from his trousers and aimed it at the cashier. "Give me all your money now and two whoppers!"

Startled, the cashier raised her hands, "Please, don't shoot me, sir."

"I won't shoot you, just do what I say and nothing's going to happen!"

Trembling, the lady opened the register and handed the money over to Rob. "Now get me the whoppers!" he demanded.

She began to race to get the whoppers when a sudden revelation befell her, "Sir, this is Wendy's, we don't carry whoppers."

Rob then looked at Jack all cocky and said, "You hear that, Jack? They don't have whoppers!" As he said those words, he faced the cashier and was about to ask Jack for his order when a mighty blow knocked him out. It was Jack.

Police later arrived on the scene and Jack became the town's hero. Apparently, there was a \$25,000 reward for Rob's arrest. "No more peddling on the street corner for me," Jack said, "I'm going to be rich."