



Chapter 3

Birthday-Presents

“It’s my brother!” the Sub-warden exclaimed, in a warning whisper. “Speak out, and be quick about it!”

The appeal was evidently addressed to the Lord Chancellor, who instantly replied, in a shrill monotone, like a little boy repeating the alphabet, “As I was remarking, your Sub-Excellency, this portentous movement—”

“You began too soon!” the other interrupted, scarcely able to restrain himself to a whisper, so great was his excitement. “He couldn’t have heard you. Begin again!” “As I was remarking,” chanted the obedient Lord Chancellor, “this portentous movement has already assumed the dimensions of a Revolution!”

“And what are the dimensions of a Revolution?” The voice was genial and mellow, and the face of the tall dignified old man, who had just entered the room, leading Sylvie by the hand, and with Bruno riding triumphantly on his shoulder, was too noble and gentle to have scared a less guilty man: but the Lord Chancellor turned pale instantly, and could hardly articulate the words “The dimensions your— your High Excellency? I—I—scarcely comprehend!”

“Well, the length, breadth, and thickness, if you like it better!” And the old man smiled, half-contemptuously.

The Lord Chancellor recovered himself with a great effort, and pointed to the open window. “If your High Excellency will listen for a moment to the shouts of the exasperated populace—” (“of the exasperated populace!” the Sub-Warden repeated in a louder tone, as the Lord Chancellor, being in a state of abject terror, had dropped almost into a whisper) “—you will understand what it is they want. “

And at that moment there surged into the room a hoarse confused cry, in which the only clearly audible words were “Less—bread—More—taxes!” The old man laughed heartily. “What in the world—” he was beginning: but the Chancellor heard him not. “Some mistake!” he muttered, hurrying to the window, from which he shortly returned with an air of relief. “Now listen!” he exclaimed, holding up his hand impressively. And now the words

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came quite distinctly, and with the regularity of the ticking of a clock, "More—bread—Less taxes!"

"More bread!" the Warden repeated in astonishment. "Why, the new Government Bakery was opened only last week, and I gave orders to sell the bread at cost-price during the present scarcity! What can they expect more?"

"The Bakery's closed, y'reince!" the Chancellor said, more loudly and clearly than he had spoken yet. He was emboldened by the consciousness that here, at least, he had evidence to produce: and he placed in the Warden's hands a few printed notices, that were lying ready, with some open ledgers, on a side-table.

"Yes, yes, I see!" the Warden muttered, glancing carelessly through them. "Order countermanded by my brother, and supposed to be my doing! Rather sharp practice! It's all right!" he added in a louder tone. "My name is signed to it: so I take it on myself. But what do they mean by 'Less Taxes'? How can they be less? I abolished the last of them a month ago!"

"It's been put on again, y'reince, and by y'reince's own orders!", and other printed notices were submitted for inspection.

The Warden, whilst looking them over, glanced once or twice at the Sub-Warden, who had seated himself before one of the open ledgers, and was quite absorbed in adding it up; but he merely repeated "It's all right. I accept it as my doing."

"And they do say," the Chancellor went on sheepishly—looking much more like a convicted thief than an Officer of State, "that a change of Government, by the abolition of the Sub-Warden—I mean," he hastily added, on seeing the Warden's look of astonishment, "the abolition of the office of Sub-Warden, and giving the present holder the right to act as Vice-Warden whenever the Warden is absent—would appease all this seedling discontent I mean," he added, glancing at a paper he held in his hand, "all this seething discontent!"

"For fifteen years," put in a deep but very harsh voice, "my husband has been acting as Sub-Warden. It is too long! It is much too long!" My Lady was a vast creature at all times: but, when she frowned and folded her arms, as now, she looked more gigantic than ever, and made one try to fancy what a haystack would look like, if out of temper.

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“He would distinguish himself as a Vice!” my Lady proceeded, being far too stupid to see the double meaning of her words. “There has been no such Vice in Outland for many a long year, as he would be!”

“What course would you suggest, Sister?” the Warden mildly enquired.

My Lady stamped, which was undignified: and snorted, which was ungraceful. “This is no jesting matter!” she bellowed.

“I will consult my brother, said the Warden. “Brother!”

“—and seven makes a hundred and ninety-four, which is sixteen and two-pence,” the Sub-Warden replied. “Put down two and carry sixteen.”

The Chancellor raised his hands and eyebrows, lost in admiration. “Such a man of business!” he murmured.

“Brother, could I have a word with you in my Study?” the Warden said in a louder tone. The Sub-Warden rose with alacrity, and the two left the room together.

My Lady turned to the Professor, who had uncovered the urn, and was taking its temperature with his pocket-thermometer. “Professor!” she began, so loudly and suddenly that even Uggug, who had gone to sleep in his chair, left off snoring and opened one eye. The Professor pocketed his thermometer in a moment, clasped his hands, and put his head on one side with a meek smile

“You were teaching my son before breakfast, I believe?” my Lady loftily remarked. “I hope he strikes you as having talent?”

“Oh, very much so indeed, my Lady!” the Professor hastily replied, unconsciously rubbing his ear, while some painful recollection seemed to cross his mind. “I was very forcibly struck by His Magnificence, I assure you!”

“He is a charming boy!” my Lady exclaimed. “Even his snores are more musical than those of other boys!”

If that were so, the Professor seemed to think, the snores of other boys must be something too awful to be endured: but he was a cautious man, and he said nothing.

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“And he’s so clever!” my Lady continued. “No one will enjoy your Lecture more by the way, have you fixed the time for it yet? You’ve never given one, you know: and it was promised years ago, before you—

“Yes, yes, my Lady, I know! Perhaps next Tuesday or Tuesday week—”

“That will do very well,” said my Lady, graciously. “Of course you will let the Other Professor lecture as well?”

“I think not, my Lady? the Professor said with some hesitation. “You see, he always stands with his back to the audience. It does very well for reciting; but for lecturing—”

“You are quite right,” said my Lady. “And, now I come to think of it, there would hardly be time for more than one Lecture. And it will go off all the better, if we begin with a Banquet, and a Fancy-dress Ball—”

“It will indeed!” the Professor cried, with enthusiasm.

“I shall come as a Grass-hopper,” my Lady calmly proceeded. “What shall you come as, Professor?”

The Professor smiled feebly. “I shall come as—as early as I can, my Lady!”

“You mustn’t come in before the doors are opened,” said my Lady.

“I ca’n’t,” said the Professor. “Excuse me a moment. As this is Lady Sylvie’s birthday, I would like to—” and he rushed away.

Bruno began feeling in his pockets, looking more and more melancholy as he did so: then he put his thumb in his mouth, and considered for a minute: then he quietly left the room.

He had hardly done so before the Professor was back again, quite out of breath. “Wishing you many happy returns of the day, my dear child!” he went on, addressing the smiling little girl, who had run to meet him. “Allow me to give you a birthday-present. It’s a second-hand pincushion, my dear. And it only cost fourpence-halfpenny!”

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“Thank you, it’s very pretty!” And Sylvie rewarded the old man with a hearty kiss.

“And the pins they gave me for nothing!” the Professor added in high glee. “Fifteen of ‘em, and only one bent!”

“I’ll make the bent one into a hook!” said Sylvie. “To catch Bruno with, when he runs away from his lessons!”

“You ca’n’t guess what my present is!” said Uggug, who had taken the butter-dish from the table, and was standing behind her, with a wicked leer on his face.

“No, I ca’n’t guess,” Sylvie said without looking up. She was still examining the Professor’s pincushion.

“It’s this!” cried the bad boy, exultingly, as he emptied the dish over her, and then, with a grin of delight at his own cleverness, looked round for applause.

Sylvie coloured crimson, as she shook off the butter from her frock: but she kept her lips tight shut, and walked away to the window, where she stood looking out and trying to recover her temper.

Uggug’s triumph was a very short one: the Sub-Warden had returned, just in time to be a witness of his dear child’s playfulness, and in another moment a skilfully-applied box on the ear had changed the grin of delight into a howl of pain.

“My darling!” cried his mother, enfolding him in her fat arms. “Did they box his ears for nothing? A precious pet!”

“It’s not for nothing!” growled the angry father. “Are you aware, Madam, that I pay the house-bills, out of a fixed annual sum? The loss of all that wasted butter falls on me! Do you hear, Madam!”

“Hold your tongue, Sir!” My Lady spoke very quietly—almost in a whisper. But there was something in her look which silenced him. “Don’t you see it was only a joke? And a very clever one, too! He only meant that he loved nobody but her! And, instead of being pleased with the compliment, the spiteful little thing has gone away in a huff!”

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The Sub-Warden was a very good hand at changing a subject. He walked across to the window. "My dear," he said, "is that a pig that I see down below, rooting about among your flower-beds?"

"A pig!" shrieked my Lady, rushing madly to the window, and almost pushing her husband out, in her anxiety to see for herself. "Whose pig is it? How did it get in? Where's that crazy Gardener gone?"

At this moment Bruno re-entered the room, and passing Uggug (who was blubbering his loudest, in the hope of attracting notice) as if he was quite used to that sort of thing, he ran up to Sylvie and threw his arms round her. "I went to my toy-cupboard," he said with a very sorrowful face, "to see if there were somefin fit for a present for oo! And there isn't nuffin! They's all broken, every one! And I haven't got no money left, to buy oo a birthday-present! And I ca'n't give oo nuffin but this!" ("This" was a very earnest hug and a kiss.)

"Oh, thank you, darling!" cried Sylvie. "I like your present best of all!" (But if so, why did she give it back so quickly?)

His Sub-Excellency turned and patted the two children on the head with his long lean hands. "Go away, dears!" he said. "There's business to talk over. "

Sylvie and Bruno went away hand in hand: but, on reaching the door, Sylvie came back again and went up to Uggug timidly. "I don't mind about the butter," she said, "and I—I'm sorry he hurt you!" And she tried to shake hands with



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the little ruffian: but Uggug only blubbered louder, and wouldn't make friends. Sylvie left the room with a sigh.

The Sub-Warden glared angrily at his weeping son. "Leave the room, Sirrah!" he said, as loud as he dared. His wife was still leaning out of the window, and kept repeating "I ca'n't see that pig! Where is it?"

"It's moved to the right now it's gone a little to the left," said the Sub-Warden: but he had his back to the window, and was making signals to the Lord Chancellor, pointing to Uggug and the door, with many a cunning nod and wink.

The Chancellor caught his meaning at last, and, crossing the room, took that interesting child by the ear the next moment he and Uggug were out of the room, and the door shut behind them: but not before one piercing yell had rung through the room, and reached the ears of the fond mother.

"What is that hideous noise?" she fiercely asked, turning upon her startled husband.

"It's some hyaena—or other," replied the Sub-Warden, looking vaguely up to the ceiling, as if that was where they usually were to be found. "Let us to business, my dear. Here comes the Warden." And he picked up from the floor a wandering scrap of manuscript, on which I just caught the words 'after which Election duly holden the said Sibimet and Tabikat his wife may at their pleasure assume Imperial—' before, with a guilty look, he crumpled it up in his hand.