



Chapter 13

What Tottles Meant

Mein Herr unrolled the manuscript, but, to my great surprise, instead of reading it, he began to sing it, in a rich mellow voice that seemed to ring through the room.

“One thousand pounds per annum
Is not so bad a figure, come!”
Cried Tottles. “And I tell you, flat,
A man may marry well on that!
To say ‘the Husband needs the Wife’
Is not the way to represent it.
The crowning joy of Woman’s life
Is Man!” said Tottles (and he meant it).

The blissful Honey-moon is past:
The Pair have settled down at last:
Mamma-in-law their home will share
And make their happiness her care.
”Your income is an ample one:
Go it, my children!” (And they went it).
”I rather think this kind of fun
Wo’n’t last!” said Tottles (and he meant it).

They took a little country-box--
A box at Covent Garden also:
T hey lived a life of double-knocks
Acquaintances began to call so:
Their London house was much the same
(It took three hundred, clear, to rent it):
”Life is a very jolly game!”
Cried happy Tottles (and he meant it).

“Contented with a frugal lot”
(He always used that phrase at Gunter’s)
He bought a handy little yacht--

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A dozen serviceable hunters--
the fishing of a Highland Loch--
A sailing-boat to circumvent it--
"The sounding of that Gaelic 'och'
Beats me!" said Tottles (and he meant it).

Here, with one of those convulsive starts that wake one up in the very act of dropping off to sleep, I became conscious that the deep musical tones that thrilled me did not belong to Mein Herr, but to the French Count. The old man was still conning the manuscript.

"I beg your pardon for keeping you waiting!" he said. "I was just making sure that I knew the English for all the words. I am quite ready now." And he read me the following Legend:

"In a city that stands in the very centre of Africa, and is rarely visited by the casual tourist, the people had always bought eggs--a daily necessary in a climate where egg-flip was the usual diet--from a Merchant who came to their gates once a week. And the people always bid wildly against each other: so there was quite a lively auction every time the Merchant came, and the last egg in his basket used to fetch the value of two or three camels, or thereabouts. And eggs got dearer every week. And still they drank their egg-flip, and wondered where all their money went to.

"And there came a day when they put their heads together. And they understood what donkeys they had been.

"And next day, when the Merchant came, only one Man went forth. And he said 'Oh, thou of the hook-nose and the goggle-eyes, thou of the measureless beard, how much for that lot of eggs?'

"And the Merchant answered him 'I could let thee have that lot at ten thousand piastres the dozen'.

"And the Man chuckled inwardly, and said 'Ten piastres the dozen I offer thee, and no more, oh descendant of a distinguished grandfather!'

"And the Merchant stroked his beard, and said 'Hum! I will await the coming of thy friends.' So he waited. And the Man waited with him. And they waited both together."

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“The manuscript breaks off here,” said Mein Herr, as he rolled it up again; “but it was enough to open our eyes. We saw what simpletons we had been--buying our Scholars much as those ignorant savages bought their eggs--and the ruinous system was abandoned. If only we could have abandoned, along with it, all the other fashions we had borrowed from you, instead of carrying them to their logical results! But it was not to be. What ruined my country, and drove me from my home, was the introduction--into the Army, of all places--of your theory of Political Dichotomy!”

“Shall I trouble you too much,” I said, “if I ask you to explain what you mean by ‘the Theory of Political Dichotomy’?”

“No trouble at all!” was Mein Herr’s most courteous reply. “I quite enjoy talking, when I get so good a listener. What started the thing, with us, was the report brought to us, by one of our most eminent statesmen, who had stayed some time in England, of the way affairs were managed there. It was a political necessity (so he assured us, and we believed him, though we had never discovered it till that moment) that there should be two Parties, in every affair and on every subject. In Politics, the two Parties, which you had found it necessary to institute, were called, he told us, ‘Whigs’ and ‘Tories’.”

“That must have been some time ago?” I remarked.

“It was some time ago,” he admitted. “And this was the way the affairs of the British Nation were managed. (You will correct me if I misrepresent it. I do but repeat what our traveler told us.) These two Parties--which were in chronic hostility to each other--took turns in conducting the Government; and the Party, that happened not to be in power, was called the ‘Opposition’, I believe?”

“That is the right name,” I said. “There have always, so long as we have had a Parliament at all, two Parties, one ‘in’, and one ‘out’.”

“Well, the function of the ‘Ins’ (if I may so call them) was to do the best they could for the national welfare--in such things as making war or peace, commercial, treaties, and so forth?”

Undoubtedly,” I said.

“And the function of the ‘Outs’ was (so our traveler assured us, though we were very incredulous at first) to prevent the ‘Ins’ from succeeding in any of these things?” ~

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“To criticize and to amend their proceedings,” I corrected him. “It would be unpatriotic to hinder the Government in doing what was for the good of the Nation! We have always held a Patriot to be the greatest of heroes, and an unpatriotic spirit to be one of the worst of human ills!”

“Excuse me for a moment,” the old gentleman courteously replied, taking out his pocket-book. “I have a few memoranda here, of a correspondence I had with our tourist, and, if you will allow me, I’ll just refresh my memory--although I quite agree with you--it is, as you say, one of the worst of human ills--” And, here Mein Herr began singing again:

But oh, the worst of human ills
(Poor Tottles found) are “little bills”!
And, with no balance in the Bank,
What wonder that his spirits sank?
Still, as the money flowed away,
He wondered how on earth she spent it.
“You cost me twenty pounds a day,
At least!” cried Tottles (and he meant it).

She sighed. “Those Drawing Rooms, you know!
I really never thought about it:
Mamma declared we ought to go--
We should be Nobodies without it.
That diamond-circlet for my brow--
I quite believed that she had sent it,
Until the Bill came in just now--”
“Viper!” cried Tottles (and he meant it).

Poor Mrs. T. could bear no more,
But fainted flat upon the floor.
Mamma-in-law, with anguish wild
Seeks, all in vain, to rouse her child.
“Quick! Take this box of smelling-salts!
Don’t scold her, James, or you’ll repent it,
She’s a dear girl, with all her faults--”
“She is!” groaned Tottles (and he meant it).

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"I was a donkey", Tottles cried,
"To choose your daughter for my bride!
'Twas you that bid us cut a dash!
'Tis you have brought us to this smash!
You don't suggest one single thing
That can in any way prevent it -"
"Then what's the use of arguing?"
"Shut up!" cried Tottles (and he meant it).

Once more I started into wakefulness, and realized that Mein Herr was not the singer. He was still consulting his memoranda.

"It is exactly what my friend told me," he resumed, after conning over various papers. "'Unpatriotic' is the very word I had used, in writing to him, and 'hinder' is the very word he used in his reply! Allow me to read you a portion of his letter:

" 'I can assure you,' he writes, 'that unpatriotic as you may think it, the recognized function of the Opposition' is to hinder in every manner not forbidden by the Law, the action of the Government. This process is called 'Legitimate Obstruction': and the greatest triumph the 'Opposition' can ever enjoy, is when they are able to point out that, owing to their 'Obstruction' the Government have failed in everything they have tried to do for the good of the Nation! "

"Your friend has not put it quite correctly," I said. "The Opposition would no doubt be glad to point out that the government had failed through their own fault; but not that they had failed on account of Obstruction!"

"You think so?" he gently replied. "Allow me now to read to you this newspaper-cutting, which my friend enclosed in his letter. It is part of the report of a public speech, made by a Statesman who was at the time a member of the 'Opposition':

" "At the close of the Session, he thought they had no reason to be discontented with the fortunes of the campaign. They had routed the enemy at every point. But the pursuit must be continued. They had only to follow up a disordered and dispirited foe.' "

"Now to what portion of your national history would you guess that the speaker was referring?"

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“Really, the number of successful wars we have waged during the last century”, I replied, with a glow of British pride, “is far too great for me to guess, with any chance of success, which it was we were then engaged in. However, I will name ‘India’ as the most probable. The Mutiny was no doubt, all but crushed, at the time that speech was made. What a fine, manly, patriotic speech it must have been!” I exclaimed in an outburst of enthusiasm.

“You think so?” he replied, in a tone of gentle pity. “Yet my friend tells me that the ‘disordered and dispirited foe’ simply meant the Statesmen who happened to be in power at the moment; that the ‘pursuit’ simply meant ‘Obstruction’; and that the words ‘they had routed the enemy’ simply meant that the ‘Opposition’ had succeeded in hindering the Government from doing any of the work which the Nation had empowered them to do!”

I thought it best to say nothing.

“It seemed queer to us, just at first,” he resumed, after courteously waiting a minute for me to speak: “but, when once we had mastered the idea, our respect for your Nation was so great that we carried it into every department of life! It was ‘the beginning of the end’ with us. My country never held up its head again!” And the poor old gentleman sighed deeply.

“Let us change the subject,” I said. “Do not distress yourself, I beg!”

“No, no!” he said, with an effort to recover himself. “I had rather finish my story! The next step (after reducing our Government to impotence, and putting a stop to all useful legislation, which did not take us long to do) was to introduce what we called ‘the glorious British Principle of Dichotomy’ into Agriculture. We persuaded many of the well-to-do farmers to divide their staff of labourers into two Parties, and to set them one against the other. They were called, like our political Parties, the ‘Ins’ and the ‘Outs’: the business of the ‘Ins’ was to do as much of ploughing, sowing, or whatever might be needed, as they could manage in a day, and at night they were paid according to the amount they had done: the business of the ‘Outs’ was to hinder them, and they were paid for the amount they had hindered. The farmers found they had to pay only half as much wages as they did before, and they didn’t observe that the amount of work done was only a quarter as much as was done before: so they took it up quite enthusiastically, at first.”

“And afterwards?” I enquired.

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“Well, afterwards they didn’t like it quite so well. In a very short time, things settled down into a regular routine. No work at all was done. So the ‘Ins’ got no wages, and the ‘Outs’ got full pay. And the farmers never discovered, till most of them were ruined, that the rascals had agreed to manage it so, and had shared the pay between them! While the thing lasted, there were funny sights to be seen! Why, I’ve often watched a ploughman with two horses harnessed to the plough, doing his best to get it forwards; while the opposition-ploughman, with three donkeys harnessed at the other end, was doing his best to get it backwards! And the plough never moving an inch, either way!”

“But we never did anything like that!” I exclaimed.

“Simply because you were less logical than we were,” replied Mein Herr. “There is sometimes an advantage in being a donk--Excuse me! No personal allusion intended. All this happened long ago, you know!”

“Did the Dichotomy-Principle succeed in any direction?” I enquired.

“In none,” Mein Herr candidly confessed. “It had a very short trial in Commerce. The shop-keepers wouldn’t take it up, after once trying the plan of having half the attendants busy in folding up and carrying away the goods which the other half were trying to spread out upon the counters. They said the Public didn’t like it!”

“I don’t wonder at it,” I remarked.

“Well, we tried ‘the British Principle’ for some years. And the end of it all was “ His voice suddenly dropped, almost to a whisper; and large tears began to roll down his cheeks. “--the end was that we got involved in a war; and there was a great battle, in which we far out-numbered the enemy. But what could one expect, when only half of our soldiers were fighting, and the other half pulling them back? It ended in a crushing defeat--an utter rout. This caused a Revolution; and most of the Government were banished. I myself was accused of Treason, for having so strongly advocated ‘the British Principle’. My property was all forfeited, and--and--I was driven into exile! ‘Now the mischief’s done,’ they said, ‘perhaps you’ll kindly leave the country?’ It nearly broke my heart, but I had to go!”

The melancholy tone became a wail: the wail became a chant: the chant became a song--though whether it was Mein Herr that was singing, this time, or somebody else, I could not feel certain.

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“And now the mischief’s done, perhaps
You’ll kindly go and pack your traps?
Since two (your daughter and your son)
Are Company, but three are none.
A course of saving we’ll begin:
When change is needed, I’ll invent it:
Don’t think to put your finger in
This pie!” cried Tottles (and he meant it).

The music seemed to die away. Mein Herr was again speaking in his ordinary voice. “Now tell me one thing more,” he said. “Am I right in thinking that in your Universities, though a man may reside some thirty or forty years, you examine him, once for all, at the end of the first three or four?”

“That is so, undoubtedly,” I admitted.

“Practically, then, you examine a man at the beginning of his career!” the old man said to himself rather than to me. “And what guarantee have you that he retains the knowledge for which you have rewarded him--beforehand, as we should say?”

“None,” I admitted, feeling a little puzzled at the drift of his remarks. “How do you secure that object?”

“By examining him at the end of his thirty or forty years--not at the beginning,” he gently replied. “On an average, the knowledge then found is about one-fifth of what it was at first--the process of forgetting going on at a very steady uniform rate--and he, who forgets least, gets most honour, and most rewards.”

“Then you give him the money when he needs it no longer? And you make him live most of his life on nothing!”

“Hardly that. He gives his orders to the tradesmen: they supply him, for forty, sometimes fifty years, at their own risk: then he gets his Fellowship--which pays him in one year as much as your Fellowships pay in fifty-- and then he can easily pay all his bills, with interest.”

“But suppose he fails to get his Fellowship? That must occasionally happen.”

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“That occasionally happens.” It was Mein Herr’s turn, now, to make admissions.

“And what becomes of the tradesmen?”

“They calculate accordingly. When a man appears to be getting alarmingly ignorant, or stupid, they will sometimes refuse to supply him any longer. You have no idea with what enthusiasm a man will begin to rub up his ten sciences or languages, when his butcher has cut supply of beef and mutton!”

“And who are the Examiners?”

The young men who have just come, brimming over with knowledge. You would think it a curious sight,” he went on, “to see mere boys examining such old men. I have known a man set to examine his own grandfather. It was a little painful for both of them, no doubt. The gentleman was as bald as a coot--”

“How bald would that be?” I’ve no idea why I asked this question. I felt I was getting foolish.