

# Her Birthday

By Algernon Blackwood

It was her birthday on the morrow, and I set forth to find a suitable and worthy present. My means, judged by the standards of the big merchants, seemed trivial; yet, could I but discover the right gift, no matter how insignificant, I felt sure that it would please her, and so make me doubly happy. And the kind of gift I already knew, for I had a specimen of it in my humble lodgings; only of so poor a type that I was ashamed to offer it. I must find somewhere a much, much better one, if possible, perfect and without a single flaw. I went, therefore, into the great shops and saw a thousand wonderful and lovely things. . . .

So particular was I, however, and so difficult to suit, that I wearied the salesfolk, and began to feel despondent. All that they showed me was so wrong—so cheap. In the matter of actual expense there was no disagreement, for I mentioned plainly beforehand the price that I would pay, or, rather, that I was prepared to pay. But in the nature and quality of the goods there was no satisfying me at all. Everything that they spread before my eyes seemed ordinary, trifling, even spurious. Marvellously fashioned, and of the most costly description, they yet seemed somewhere counterfeit. The goods were sham. Already she possessed far better. There was nowhere—and I went to the very best emporiums where the rich and favoured of the world bought their offerings—there was nowhere the little genuine thing I sought. The finest that was set before me seemed unworthy. I compared one and all with the specimen, broken yet authentic, that I had at home. And even the cleverest of the salesfolk was unable to deceive me, because I knew.

“And this, for instance?” I asked at length, far from content, yet thinking it might just do perhaps in place of anything better I could find. “How much is this magnificent, jewelled thing, with its ingenious little surprise for each day in the entire year? You mentioned—?”

“Ten million pounds, sir,” said the man obsequiously, while he eyed me with a close and questioning glance.

“Ten million only!” And I laughed in his face.

“That was the price you named, sir,” he murmured.

I drew myself up, looking disdainfully, pityingly at him. And, though he met my eye, he hesitated. Over his tired features there stole a soft and marvellous expression. Something more tender than starlight shone in his little eyes. And, as he answered in a gentle voice that was almost a whisper, I saw him smile as a man may smile when he understands a divine, unutterable thing. Glory touched him for an instant with high radiance, and a hint of delicious awe hid shyly in his voice. I barely caught the words, so low he murmured them:

“I fear, sir, that what you want is not to be had at all—in our establishment. You will hardly find it. It is not in the market.” He seemed to bow his head in reverence a moment. “It is not—for sale.”

And so I went back to my dingy lodgings, having made no single purchase. I looked fondly at my own little specimen, trying to imagine it had somehow gained in value, in beauty, almost in splendour. At least, I said to myself, it is not spurious. It is real. . . .

And, sitting down to my table, I dipped my broken pen into a penny bottle of inferior ink, and began my birthday letter “This is your birthday, dear, and I send you *all my love*—” Being young, I underlined the words describing my little present, thinking to increase its value thus.

But I did not complete the sentence, for there was another thing that I must find to send her, or she would be disappointed. And a birthday comes but once a year. But, again, though I already possessed a tiny specimen of this other thing I sought, it did not seem to me nearly good enough to offer. Though genuine, it was worn by frequent use. Its lustre had dimmed a little, for I touched it daily. It seemed too ordinary and common for a special present. I was ashamed to send it.

So I set out again and searched . . . and searched . . . in every likely and unlikely place, even groping in the dark about the altars of the churches where I found by chance the doors ajar, and penetrating to those secret shrines where those who seek truth, it is said, go in to pray. For I knew that there was this other little present from me that she would look for—because she had need of it. . . .

And my search was wonderful and full of high adventure, yet so long that the moon had drawn the hood over the door of her silver tent, and the stars were fading in the east behind the towers of the night, before I returned home, footsore, aching, empty-handed, and very humble in my heart. For nowhere had I been able to find this other little thing she would be pleased to have from me. To my amazement, yet to my secret joy, I found nothing better than what I had at home—nothing, that is, indubitably genuine. In quantity it was not anywhere for sale. It was more rare than I had guessed—and I felt delicious triumph in me.

I sat down, humble, reverent, but incommunicably proud and happy, to my unfinished letter. Unless I posted it immediately she would not get it when she woke upon her birthday morning. I finished it. I posted it just as it was—brief, the writing a little shaky, the paper cheap, blot, smudge, and all:

“ . . . and my worship.”

And then, like a scrap of paper that enclosed the other gifts, yet need not be noticed unless she wished it, I added (above the little foolish name she knew me by) another tiny present—all that I had brought into the world or could take out with me again when I left it:

I wrote: “Yours ever faith-fully.”