

GIFT GIVER

by Barbara Gipson

The large subterranean chamber was filled with a hazy amber glow. Candelabra and wall sconces set with tall burning candles chased back the shadows and gave the room a warm cheeriness. Heavy chairs of oak and frayed velvet circled a large central table and a dark, worn Oriental carpet cushioned the floor. Leather bound books were stacked throughout the room amidst the clutter of personal treasures and from a rear alcove came the sound of a whistling kettle and clinking china.

Entering the high vaulted room carrying cups of steaming tea, Vincent stepped around the children seated on the floor. They were all trying to speak at once, questioning Father.

"Did the ceiling fall down?"

"Was there any light?"

"Were you scared?"

"Shhhh, let Father explain," Vincent chided softly. Handing one cup to his father, he seated himself in a high-backed chair among the youngsters who were impatient for details and anxious for Father to continue.

Propped against several pillows, Father reclined at the head of his bed. The stark whiteness of the dressing across his forehead emphasized the paleness of his face. The ordeal in the Maze was evident in his bandaged head and the stiffness of muscles, but the resonance of his voice revealed his returning strength.

He was telling the young tunnel dwellers the story of the cave-in and rescue. The children had seen his still form carried from the rubble and perceived the concern of the other residents after a Helper had treated his injuries. They needed to be reassured of his recovery and he had requested they be allowed to visit. Listening intently, his young audience sat on the floor and spiral staircase and perched on stacks of books.

Vincent looked around for Kipper and observed him sitting on the iron stairs. He was concerned for Kipper since he had found the boy crying. Kipper blamed himself for the accident and Father's injuries because he had taken Ellie and Eric to the Maze for a game of hide-and-seek. Vincent wanted him to know that Father would be all right. He could see that Kipper looked relaxed as he listened to Father's description of the mishap.

From the ordeal in the Maze, Father was teaching a subtle lesson in obedience, responsibility and love. His voice was bringing the story to life. His words evoked a physical response from his listeners and Vincent watched the faces of the audience. Over all of them passed each emotion envisioned by the story - awe, solemnity, suspense, and the quick flicker of humor.

Father's voice was gifted, his timing perfect, his gestures controlled. He was a talented narrator, meshing with his story and surrounding his audience with magic. He wanted the children to learn an awareness of the potential dangers that existed in the tunnel world, but still have feelings of security and safety.

When one child expressed fear that other tunnels would collapse, Father explained how the ancient caverns had been formed by nature, but improved and strengthened by man. He skillfully

directed the child to stories of the Roman catacombs and the vast labyrinth of the ancient Minoans on the Island of Crete. Referring to *THE TUNNEL BUILDERS* and *THE BORROWERS* he sought to stretch their imaginations, open their hearts, and widen their horizons through his story.

Vincent had heard stories called '*love gifts*' and to hear his father tell a story, indeed, it was giving a gift. Through his storytelling, Father could lead the children to books as he had lead Vincent to books as a source of pleasure throughout his life. Volumes that had opened many worlds, taken him on far reaching journeys, and lifted him out of dark times.

Vincent listened as Father finished his narrative and watched the children approach his bed to share hugs and goodbyes. A happy relationship existed between Father and the young inhabitants, drawing them closer together.

Some of the children asked for books to read and Vincent directed them to the overhead library. Placing a chair near the bed, he offered Father another cup of his favorite tea. Weariness showed on Father's face, but his eyes sparkled with delight over the time just passed.

Vincent grinned at the departing children. "They will ask to hear that story many times again, Father. Surely, it will become a favorite adventure with Mouse as the hero and Catherine the heroine."

"Oh, yes. I can imagine the story will also contain several fierce monsters we had to fight before our rescue." Father smiled and returned the cup. Drowsiness and fatigue were visible and Vincent helped him into a more comfortable position, pulling the comforter close around him.

"You guide them to wonderful worlds of imagination, Father," he said softly. "The same way you guided me. Your affinity for the children brings them gifts of fun, laughter, and wonder."

Father grasped his son's hand and before drifting off to sleep he said, "Look in your book of poetry by Wilbur Nesbit."

Climbing the wrought iron stairs to the library, Vincent sought out the poetry book his father had mentioned and found there, Nesbit's words.

*Who hath a book
Has friends at hand
And gold and gear
At his command
And rich estates
If he but look
Are held by him
Who hath a book*

*Who hath a book
Has but to read
And he may be
A king indeed
His kingdom is
His inglenook
All this is his
Who hath a book*

END