

The Gift In William's Kitchen

By

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"A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you..."

Elbert Hubbard

The large kitchen Below was often alive with sound. It always was when William was at the helm and making himself busy with serving the tunnel dwellers three meals a day with what he had to hand in his pantry and larder.

Pots clattered, spoons scraped, the smell of yeast and roasted vegetables filled the stone chamber. It was not just a kitchen, it was the heart of the community Below.

William, sleeves rolled, large apron dusted with flour, moved with surprising grace for a man of his size. His eyes were bright, his brow damp, his voice booming out orders to the young helpers darting in and out.

"Careful with that pot of soup, Eric! Steady, steady! Don't slop it, we'll need every drop!"

"Yes, William!" Eric squeaked, almost tipping the large vessel before righting himself.

Mary, working at the breadboard, gave William a knowing look. "You've been running us ragged today. What's the occasion?"

William gave her one of his broad, mischievous smiles. "Every day's an occasion, Mary. These people count on me. You know how Vincent says the kitchen is like a hearth? Then I'm the fire that keeps us all warm."

Mary chuckled. "A very large fire."

William puffed his chest. "The largest."

But beneath the bluster was something more tender. William loved his work. He loved feeding them. Especially the children with hollow cheeks and the men and women exhausted after long days repairing tunnels or scavenging for supplies.

Even Father, whose stern lectures always softened after a spoonful of fragrant stew or a hearty soup. Food meant comfort, meant life. And William gave of it gladly.

What he never said aloud, though, was that the kitchen, for all its bustle, could sometimes feel lonely. He gave and gave, but who ever thought to give back? Not that he minded. It was his duty and his joy but still...

Once in a while, when the last pot was scrubbed and the last helper gone to bed, he would sit at the long wooden table and wonder what it might be like if someone surprised *him* for a change.

"Fat chance of that..." he muttered, as he stacked a large platter with thick slices of buttered bread and bellowed for a helper to carry it out to the hungry people already filling the dining room for their evening meal.

It was after one such late night when she came. The tunnels were quiet, lanterns guttering low, when William heard a soft tap at the door. He frowned. Few ever came to the kitchen after hours. Unless a child had crept down for a stolen roll, in which case he would pretend not to notice.

But when he opened the door, he found Lady May there.

She was tall and stately, her hair bound in silver braids, her face lined with years of kindness and sorrow. Lady May had been a helper Below for longer than most could remember. She carried with her a presence of mystery, as though she'd seen far more than she ever told.

"Good evening, William," she said, inclining her head.

"Lady May!" William exclaimed. "What are you doing out at this hour? You should be resting. Here, sit, please sit down." He guided her toward a chair, fussing as he always did. "Shall I make you tea? There's still some honey left, unless Mouse found it. His blasted raccoon is a bit partial to it."

She smiled faintly. "A cup of tea would be lovely."

William nodded and busied himself with kettle and cups, talking all the while.

"You know, it's not every day I get visitors after hours. Not unless it's Catherine sneaking Vincent some little delicacy. Ah, but you..." He smiled. "You're a rare guest indeed."

Lady May accepted the steaming cup but did not drink at once. Her dark eyes rested on him, steady and intent.

"You serve all this community tirelessly, William," she said. "Day and night, feast and famine, you give of yourself. Few realise how much you sacrifice every day."

"Awww..." William waved a hand, embarrassed. "Nonsense. This is what I'm meant to do. Everyone has their role. This is mine. And truth be told, I like it. Nothing makes me happier than seeing a full belly and a smile. That is my reward."

"I know," she murmured. "But even the generous heart must sometimes be nourished in turn. I'll be right back..."

Before William could reply, she left her stool and the kitchen. She returned with a large, covered wicker basket. She laid it on the table between them.

"This," she said. "Is for you. And only you."

William blinked. "For... me?"

He almost never heard those words. The kitchen was his domain, yes, but he was the giver, not the receiver. It felt strange, almost unsettling, to see something offered to him with such solemnity.

Lady May nodded. "Go on. Open it." She smiled as she sipped her tea. "This is good tea."

"Thank you," William murmured absently.

His thick fingers fumbled with the twine that sealed the covering cloth. Inside was a large wooden box, polished smooth, carved with vines and blossoms. The lid lifted with a soft creak.

And William stared.

Inside lay a large collection of herbs, roots, and dried blossoms the likes of which he had never seen. Some were bright as jewels. Saffron threads, deep indigo petals, a pinch of something golden that shimmered even in the dim light. Others were earthy and strange, their scents unfamiliar, mingling sweet and pungent.

"By all the tunnels..." William breathed. "What *is* this?"

"Food," Lady May said simply. "But more than food. These are gifts from places long forgotten, saved and kept for the right moment. Spices from my grandmother's garden. Seeds carried by friends now gone. Herbs gathered in secret corners of the world Above. The saffron I bought fresh this morning. It's better that way. You see, I knew it was finally time. I have tended them all, dried them and then stored them... waiting."

William swallowed, overcome. "Waiting for what?"

"For you," she said. "I knew they were always meant for you. At the right time."

It was not often that William was struck silent. His booming voice was his tool, his shield, his joy. But now words failed him.

He touched the glowing freshness of the saffron with reverent fingers, lifted the lid to his nose and inhaled the mingled perfumes. He could almost taste them already. He could imagine what they would do to a soup, a bread, a roast. The flavours would be unlike anything the community Below had ever known.

"I...," he tried, then stopped. His throat felt thick. "Lady May, I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing," she replied gently as she sipped his tea. "Let the food speak for you, as it always has. It is enough to know they have been used with love."

She sighed. "And let me know when you have exhausted these supplies. There can be more. It is the least I can do for all that you have done for me."

Still, William's eyes stung. He had never expected such a gift. Something chosen for him, something that said *'I see you, I value what you do...'*

For once, the giver became the one who received. Of course, he sent a special message Above, asking for Lady May's presence. She was the cherry on the top of his feast!

The next days were filled with a new energy in the kitchen. William pored over the herbs like a scholar with a rare book. He experimented, blending, steeping, grinding. His helpers looked on wide-eyed as he muttered to himself, sometimes laughing, sometimes frowning.

"Not too much!" he scolded when Eric reached for a handful. "These aren't ordinary seasonings. They're treasures. A pinch, a breath, that's enough."

The aromas drifting through the tunnels grew richer than ever before. Children poked their heads in, noses twitching. Even Father came down, curious.

At last, William declared he was going to hold a feast. 'Everyone of you must bring your appetite.' his message said when it was tapped out on the pipes.

They gathered in the dining chamber, lanterns bright, long tables set. Platters emerged one after another. Golden breads touched with saffron, stews infused with subtle herbs that warmed the bones, roasted roots glazed with mysterious spices that made the tongue tingle and the heart glow.

The community ate, laughed, marvelled.

"This is... this is extraordinary!" Father exclaimed between bites. "How did you manage it?"

Mary dabbed her lips. "William, you've outdone yourself."

Vincent's eyes gleamed. "You've brought something rare to us all, my friend."

Catherine, tasting the bread, smiled. "It's as though you've captured sunlight and baked it."

William beamed, pride swelling in him. But more than pride, gratitude. He caught Lady May's gaze across the table. She sat quietly, eating little, but her eyes held a secret warmth.

This was her gift, yes. But through William, it had become a gift to everyone.

Later, when the tables were cleared and the torches burned low, William found her in the kitchen again.

"Lady May," he said softly, "I don't think I'll ever be able to thank you enough. Tonight... tonight was something I'll remember all my life."

She laid a hand on his arm. "Then my gift has done its work."

"But why me?" he asked, still baffled.

"Because you feed us," she said. "Because without you, we would hunger. Not only in our bellies, but in our hearts. And sometimes, the one who feeds must also be fed."

William's throat tightened again. He pressed her hand gently.

"Then know this," he said, his voice low and firm. "Every dish I make with these herbs, every smile it brings, I'll think of you. And I'll remember that even the cook can be cared for."

Lady May smiled. "Good. Then we understand each other. Let me know when you need more. Good night, William and thank you."

In the months that followed, the herbs became a quiet legend Below. William used them sparingly, reverently, saving them for moments that mattered. A

birth, a wedding, a healing meal for someone sick. Each time, the flavours lifted spirits, sparked laughter, gave comfort.

But William himself never forgot the first moment he opened that box and felt seen. That someone cared enough to notice his efforts on behalf of all who lived Below.

He still bustled and bellowed, teased and scolded, filled bowls and bellies. But sometimes, late at night, when the kitchen was empty and the lanterns low, he would take out the carved box, breathe in its scents, and remember that even a cook's heart could be nourished.

And he would smile, softly, secretly, warmed by the generous gift of food that had left him speechless. And, of course, when the time came, he would happily become like Oliver and ask for *'more'*...

"Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever..."

Mahatma Gandhi