

Just as Mrs D. was preparing to go to bed, she heard mysterious sounds outside the kitchen-door. At first, she thought it was the wind; then she thought it was the sound of the tv from next door; then she thought it was burglars; then she didn't know what she thought; and then she thought she had better do something about it.

So, having quietly turned the key, she grabbed a kitchen knife in one hand and a clothes-pole in the other, and threw open the door.

The night was pitch-black. And there was not a sound. There were no burglars fleeing across the back-gardens. No hooting owls. The tree-tops barely moved in a quiet breeze. In the sky, the clouds had covered the moon, but they were not going anywhere. Mrs D. cautiously stepped outside and rattled about at the dustbin. Then she shouted "And don't you dare come back!" before darting back inside.

No sooner had she switched off the light and was heading upstairs than she heard it again. A sort of rustling, chattering, whistling, chewing, rattling, spinning, ticking, munching muttering sound. Outside the back door. This was too much. She stormed down the stairs, turned the key and threw open the door, ready to whack anything that moved.

In the light cast out from the kitchen, she found three small fat hamsters gathered round the compost bin. Caught in the glare, they looked absolutely terrified: their ears were up like umbrellas in a gale, their little black eyes were popping out of their heads. One of them had the sense to scarp and leaped athletically over various objects, squeaking and trilling, to hide under a shrub. The other two remained where they were, whiskers vibrating, front paws in the air, trying to spot the danger.

Mrs D. sighed. "It's you lot again, is it?" she demanded. "Patty and Bert - and who was that who scuttled behind the flower-pots?"

"That Teddy Parker," said Haricot Bert in a trembly sort of voice, for he had not had such a dreadful fright since the day his exercise-wheel sent out sparks to set the curtains on fire. "He a scaredy-cat."

"Well, tell him to come out here," said Mrs D. "And what do you think you were doing out here at this time of night? You gave me an awful fright!"

"Hamsters have bigger fright," mutter Haricot Bert as he subsided into a ball of fur and paws and he cleaned his ears zealously. It was up to Patty Perkins, having persuaded Teddy Parker to come out into the light, to explain himself.

"Hamsters have PRESENTS," he explained hopefully. "Hamsters were just trying it out."

Mrs D. considered this carefully. In the silence, Teddy Parker came out very cautiously from his hiding place, nose pointing in all directions, ready to run at the least sign of predators, angry humans or strong winds.

At last Mrs D. said: "Could you just say that again, Patty, please?"

"Hamsters have PRESENTS," said Patty.

"Oh - how sweet of you! How did you know it was my birthday tomorrow? And you mean you've brought me a birthday present? You shouldn't have bothered!" She kissed Bert and Patty on their noses; Teddy was too quick for her and ran away quickly.

Patty looked embarrassed and cleaned his nose quickly. "No no no," he muttered, "Hamsters have **PRESENTS** - Permanently Rooting Engine for Seeking Extra Nice Things to Store and Consume In Comfort of Own Nest - but ran out of space for all the words, so shortened it to PRESENTS."

"Oh," said Mrs D. disappointed.

"Yes, look, o mother with no pouches," said Teddy enthusiastically, "This what PRESENTS does." And he demonstrated the latest in HamLabs™ technology. The Rooting Engine seemed to be

some kind of large furry excavator, remotely controlled from a device which Teddy held in his front paws. As he twiddled with knobs and jerked with his shoulders, the machine spluttered into life, trundled towards the compost bin and started climbing up the side of it. When it had reached the top, there was a delay while it manoeuvred itself into optimum position for jumping (OPOSSUM). What looked uncannily like a large bottom stuck up in the air, with its little stubby aerial receiving commands from Teddy's transmitter. Then - plop! it dived into the compost heap and started ... well... rooting.

"See?!" exclaimed Teddy excitedly. "Hamsters don't get wet and dirty but hamsters have supper."

"M'm," said Mrs D., doubtfully, "I see."

Haricot Bert had finished cleaning himself and sat smugly with his fur sticking up in the air.

"Hamsters have good inventions," he said. "Hamsters have supper."

Just as Mrs D. was about to say something, the PRESENTS machine emerged from the compost-bin, coughing and spluttering, with smoke emerging from its ears. It sat precariously at the edge of the bin and engaged in some severe cleaning. Everyone could see that two large pouches to either side of its head were bulging.

"Hamsters have supper!" shouted Bert with glee. "Teddy wonders what PRESENTS we get tonight?"

"Bring it down carefully, Teddy," warned Patty Perkins. "Remember what happened at allotments." Patty turned to Mrs D. "PRESENTS got so full at allotments that it fell over on head. Teddy had to spend all night mending. Gardeners came in morning and shouted at us."

"Oh, Patty," said Mrs D, "You don't mean you were stealing things from allotments!?"

Haricot Bert shook his head vigorously. "No, not us, it was PRESENTS," he said.

Patty Perkins wanted to change the subject. "You have birthday, Mrs D?" he enquired politely.

"Hamsters have birthdays," confirmed Bert cheerily. "Lots of them. Hamsters have presents on their birthdays."

Mrs D. sighed. "Yes, another one. Tomorrow I'll be a year older."

"Hamsters have lots of years," boasted Bert.

Teddy Parker flashed his gleaming teeth at Mrs D. "But you not look old enough to have had many birthdays," he said smoothly.

"Well, I don't know, young hamster," said Mrs D., blushing. "Maybe -"

But her reply was interrupted just at that point, for PRESENTS clanked to a halt in the middle of the group at midnight and, with a belch and a groan, un-stuffed its pouches on to the ground. All kinds of things fell out - broccoli, carrot-ends, old brussels-sprouts leaves, even a few bits of cotton-wool mixed with sawdust. The three hamsters gathered round this rather smelly pile eagerly.

"Wait!" commanded Teddy Parker, "Let birthday-girl have choice pickings!"

They stood back respectfully, allowing Mrs D. a fine view of the evening's harvest of extra nice things to store and consume in the comfort of ones own nest. The longer she gazed upon it, the more she knew she might have to upset the hamsters. Finally she turned to Patty.

"As my oldest friends, I would like *you* to choose. Only one present from each of you, though."

The hamsters were more than willing to oblige. Teddy chose a rather splendid floret of broccoli which may only have been a week old. Bert selected a shapeless lump of sawdust, cotton-wool and carrot-peeling. Patty Perkins had been carrying round a Brazil Nut in his pouch for the past hour and this was his present.

Mrs D. was truly touched.

"Why, thank you, boys!" she said. "What lovely presents!"

"Hamsters have good presents," affirmed Haricot Bert, now expressing a great interest in all the things that the machine had found.

"Hamsters have good PRESENTS," stated Teddy Parker somewhat confusingly.

Not knowing quite what to do with these rather damp gifts, Mrs D. proposed to the three hamsters that they have a little party. "Indoors," she added, for it was getting rather chilly. Everyone trooped in - Bert, Patty and Teddy; and their machine.

The party did not last long; Haricot Bert wrapped his head in the cotton-wool and carrot and fell asleep in the warm kitchen, while Teddy Parker absent-mindedly ate up the Brazil Nut and the broccoli. Patty Perkins told Mrs D. about a wonderful new invention he had made, especially for teaching modern languages.

"I call it HOTELLING," he said. "It a very long book. 2587 pages."

"Oh, how interesting!" exclaimed Mrs D. "Can I see it?"

Patty fidgeted a bit and chattered. "Bad Teddy ate most of it. Only one Contents page left. Look!" And he pushed forward a rather untidy and slightly chewed page from a book.

"Well, never mind," said Mrs D. consolingly, "It does look as if it was a very thorough book. Did it take you long to write?"

"Hours and hours," said Patty sadly. He chewed on a piece of spider-plant which was dangling rather invitingly from the work-top. He brightened up. "Why you not keep it - sort of extra present for birthday?"

"Thank you very much - that will come in most handy," said Mrs D.

Just then, Teddy Parker finished his snack.

"I made new game," he announced, whiskering brightly. "Call it Jolly Serious. You want for birthday?" He produced a board and some counters from a side pouch in the PRESENTS machine and presented them to Mrs D.

She was overwhelmed. "What a beautiful game! And you made this all yourself?"

Teddy nodded proudly and launched himself on a walnut. Patty had fallen asleep; but Haricot Bert had woken up.

"You know Turkeys?" he enquired, looking quizzically at Mrs D.

"Well," she hesitated, "Sort of... Do you mean the turkeys down on Mr Johnston's farm?"

"Very ones," said Bert. "Hamsters have friends. Hamsters have turkeys. Turkeys have stories. You want read latest?"

"Well," said Mrs D. again, even more hesitantly. She knew about Turkeys and their stories and rather hoped to get through a birthday without one. Bert was, however, not dissuaded. He scampered outside and retrieved a slim volume from the saucer.

"Skinny humans have birthdays," he noted, "No pouches, lots of presents."

Mrs D. said goodnight and retired to bed with her presents. The three hamsters thought the kitchen was nice and warm. They sent PRESENTS outside to chase the next-door cats; Patty worried a piece of cauliflower the size of his head; then they all settled down for a snooze.