

“Humpty Dumpty”
from Lewis Carroll,
Through the Looking Glass, ch. 6

‘Don’t stand there chattering to yourself like that,’ Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time, ‘but tell me your name and your business.’

‘My name is Alice, but—’

‘It’s a stupid name enough!’ Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. ‘What does it mean?’

‘Must a name mean something?’ Alice asked doubtfully.

‘Of course it must,’ Humpty Dumpty said with a sort laugh: ‘my name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like your, you might be any shape, almost.’

...

‘What a beautiful belt you’ve got on!’ Alice suddenly remarked.

... ‘At least,’ she corrected herself on second thoughts, ‘a beautiful cravat, I should have said—no, a belt, I mean—I beg your pardon!’ she added in dismay, for Humpty Dumpty looked thoroughly offended, and she began to wish she hadn’t chosen that subject. ‘If I only knew,’ she thought to herself, ‘which was neck and which was waist!’

Evidently Humpty Dumpty was very angry, though he said nothing for a minute or two. When he did speak again, it was in a deep growl.

‘It is a—most—provoking—thing,’ he said at last, ‘when a person doesn’t know a cravat from a belt!’

‘I know it’s very ignorant of me,’ Alice said, in so humble a tone that Humpty Dumpty relented.

‘It’s a cravat, child, and a beautiful one, as you say. It’s a present from the White King and Queen. There now!’

‘Is it really?’ said Alice, quite pleased to find that she had chosen a good subject, after all.

‘They gave it me,’ Humpty Dumpty continued thoughtfully, as he crossed one knee over the other and clasped his hands round it, ‘they gave it me—for an un-birthday present.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Alice said with a puzzled air.

‘I’m not offended,’ said Humpty Dumpty.

‘I mean, what is an un-birthday present?’

‘A present given when it isn’t your birthday, of course.’

Alice considered a little. ‘I like birthday presents best,’ she said at last.

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about!’ cried Humpty Dumpty. ‘How many days are there in a year?’

‘Three hundred and sixty-five,’ said Alice.

‘And how many birthdays have you?’

‘One.’

‘And if you take one from three hundred and sixty-five, what remains?’

‘Three hundred and sixty-four, of course.’

Humpty Dumpty looked doubtful. ‘I’d rather see that done on paper,’ he said.

Alice couldn’t help smiling as she took out her memorandum-book, and worked the sum for him:

$$\begin{array}{r} 365 \\ \underline{1} \\ 364 \end{array}$$

Humpty Dumpty took the book, and looked at it carefully. ‘That seems to be done right—’ he began.

‘You’re holding it upside down!’ Alice interrupted.

‘To be sure I was!’ Humpty Dumpty said gaily, as she turned it round for him. ‘I thought it looked a little queer. As I was saying, that seems to be done right—’

though I haven't time to look it over thoroughly just now—and that shows that there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents—'

'Certainly,' said Alice.

'And only one for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!'

'I don't know what you mean by "glory,"' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'

'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected.

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. 'They've a temper, some of them—particularly verbs, they're the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, I can manage the whole of them! Impenetrability! That's what I say!'

'Would you tell me, please,' said Alice 'what that means?'

'Now you talk like a reasonable child,' said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. 'I meant by "impenetrability" that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life.'

'That's a great deal to make one word mean,' Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

'When I make a word do a lot of work like that,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'I always pay it extra.'

'Oh!' said Alice. She was too much puzzled to make any other remark.

'Ah, you should see 'em come round me of a Saturday night,' Humpty Dumpty went on, wagging his head gravely from side to side: 'for to get their wages, you know.'

(Alice didn't venture to ask what he paid them with; and so you see I can't tell you.)