

EWING

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SNAP-DRAGONS; OLD
FATHER CHRISTMAS

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Snap-Dragons; Old Father Christmas

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Содержание

Chapter One	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

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Snap-Dragons; Old Father Christmas

Chapter One

Mr and Mrs Skratdj

Once upon a time there lived a certain family of the name of Skratdj. (It has a Russian or Polish look, and yet they most certainly lived in England.) They were remarkable for the following peculiarity. They seldom seriously quarrelled, but they never agreed about anything. It is hard to say whether it were more painful for their friends to hear them constantly contradicting each other, or gratifying to discover that it “meant nothing,” and was “only their way.”

It began with the father and mother. They were a worthy couple, and really attached to each other. But they had a habit of contradicting each other’s statements, and opposing each other’s opinions, which, though mutually understood and allowed for in private, was most trying to the bystanders in public. If one related an anecdote, the other would break in with half-a-dozen corrections of trivial details of no interest or importance to anyone, the speakers included. For instance: Suppose the two dining in a strange house, and Mrs Skratdj seated by the host, and contributing to the small-talk of the dinner-table. Thus: —

“Oh yes. Very changeable weather indeed. It looked quite promising yesterday morning in the town, but it began to rain at noon.”

“A quarter past eleven, my dear,” Mr Skratdj’s voice would be heard to say from several chairs down, in the corrective tones of a husband and a father; “and really, my dear, so far from being a promising morning, I must say it looked about as threatening as it well could. Your memory is not always accurate in small matters, my love.” But Mrs Skratdj had not been a wife and a mother for fifteen years, to be snuffed out at one snap of the marital snuffers. As Mr Skratdj leaned forward in his chair, she leaned forward in hers, and defended herself across the intervening couples.

“Why, my dear Mr Skratdj, you said yourself the weather had not been so promising for a week.”

“What I said, my dear, pardon me, was that the barometer was higher than it had been for a week. But, as you might have observed if these details were in your line, my love, which they are not, the rise was extraordinarily rapid, and there is no surer sign of unsettled weather. — But Mrs Skratdj is apt to forget these unimportant trifles,” he added, with a comprehensive smile round the dinner-table; “her thoughts are very properly absorbed by the more important domestic questions of the nursery.”

“Now I think that’s rather unfair on Mr Skratdj’s part,” Mrs Skratdj would chirp, with a smile quite as affable and as general as her husband’s. “I’m sure he’s *quite* as forgetful and inaccurate as I am. And I don’t think *my* memory is at *all* a bad one.”

“You forgot the dinner hour when we were going out to dine last week, nevertheless,” said Mr Skratdj.

“And you couldn’t help me when I asked you,” was the sprightly retort. “And I’m sure it’s not like you to forget anything about *dinner*, my dear.”

“The letter was addressed to you,” said Mr Skratdj.

“I sent it to you by Jemima,” said Mrs Skratdj.

“I didn’t read it,” said Mr Skratdj.

“Well, you burnt it,” said Mrs Skratdj; “and, as I always say, there’s nothing more foolish than burning a letter of invitation before the day, for one is certain to forget.”

“I’ve no doubt you always do say it,” Mr Skratdj remarked, with a smile, “but I certainly never remember to have heard the observation from your lips, my love.”

“Whose memory’s in fault there?” asked Mrs Skratdj triumphantly; and as at this point the ladies rose, Mrs Skratdj had the last word.

Indeed, as may be gathered from this conversation, Mrs Skratdj was quite able to defend herself. When she was yet a bride, and young and timid, she used to collapse when Mr Skratdj contradicted her statements, and set her stories straight in public. Then she hardly ever opened her lips without disappearing under the domestic extinguisher. But in the course of fifteen years she had learned that Mr Skratdj’s bark was a great deal worse than his bite. (If, indeed, he had a bite at all.) Thus snubs that made other people’s ears tingle, had no effect whatever on the lady to whom they were addressed, for she knew exactly what they were worth, and had by this time become fairly adept at snapping in return. In the days when she succumbed she was occasionally unhappy, but now she and her husband understood each other, and having agreed to differ, they unfortunately agreed also to differ in public.

Indeed, it was the by-standers who had the worst of it on these occasions. To the worthy couple themselves the habit had become second nature, and in no way affected the friendly tenour of their domestic relations. They would interfere with each other’s conversation, contradicting assertions, and disputing conclusions for a whole evening; and then, when all the world and his wife thought that these ceaseless sparks of bickering must blaze up into a flaming quarrel as soon as they were alone, they would bowl amicably home in a cab, criticising the friends who were commenting upon them, and as little agreed about the events of the evening as about the details of any other events whatever.

Yes. The by-standers certainly had the worst of it. Those who were near wished themselves anywhere else, especially when appealed to. Those who were at a distance did not mind so much. A domestic squabble at a certain distance is interesting, like an engagement viewed from a point beyond the range of guns. In such a position one may some day be placed oneself! Moreover, it gives a touch of excitement to a dull evening to be able to say *sotto voce* to one’s neighbour, “Do listen! The Skratdjs are at it again!” Their unmarried friends thought a terrible abyss of tyranny and aggravation must lie beneath it all, and blessed their stars that they were still single, and able to tell a tale their own way. The married ones had more idea of how it really was, and wished in the name of common sense and good taste that Skratdj and his wife would not make fools of themselves.

So it went on, however; and so, I suppose, it goes on still, for not many bad habits are cured in middle age.

On certain questions of comparative speaking their views were never identical. Such as the temperature being hot or cold, things being light or dark, the apple-tarts being sweet or sour. So one day Mr Skratdj came into the room, rubbing his hands, and planting himself at the fire with “Bitterly cold it is to-day, to be sure.”

“Why, my dear William,” said Mrs Skratdj, “I’m sure you must have got a cold; I feel a fire quite oppressive myself.”

“You were wishing you’d a seal-skin jacket yesterday, when it wasn’t half as cold as it is to-day,” said Mr Skratdj.

“My dear William! Why, the children were shivering the whole day, and the wind was in the north.”

“Due east, Mrs Skratdj.”

“I know by the smoke,” said Mrs Skratdj, softly but decidedly.

“I fancy I can tell an east wind when I feel it,” said Mr Skratdj, jocosely, to the company.

“I told Jemima to look at the weathercock,” murmured Mrs Skratdj.

“I don’t care a fig for Jemima,” said her husband.

On another occasion Mrs Skratdj and a lady friend were conversing.

... “We met him at the Smiths’ – a gentlemanlike agreeable man, about forty,” said Mrs Skratdj, in reference to some matter interesting to both ladies.

“Not a day over thirty-five,” said Mr Skratdj, from behind his newspaper.

“Why, my dear William, his hair’s grey,” said Mrs Skratdj.

“Plenty of men are grey at thirty,” said Mr Skratdj. “I knew a man who was grey at twenty-five.”

“Well, forty or thirty-five, it doesn’t much matter,” said Mrs Skratdj, about to resume her narration.

“Five years matter a good deal to most people at thirty-five,” said Mr Skratdj, as he walked towards the door. “They would make a remarkable difference to me, I know;” and with a jocular air Mr Skratdj departed, and Mrs Skratdj had the rest of the anecdote her own way.

The Little Skratdjs

The Spirit of Contradiction finds a place in most nurseries, though to a very varying degree in different ones. Children snap and snarl by nature, like young puppies; and most of us can remember taking part in some such spirited dialogues as the following: —

“I will.” “You daren’t.”

“You can’t.” “I dare.”

“You shall.” “I’ll tell Mamma.”

“I won’t.” “I don’t care if you do.”

It is the part of wise parents to repress these squibs and crackers of juvenile contention, and to enforce that slowly-learned lesson, that in this world one must often “pass over” and “put up with” things in other people, being oneself by no means perfect. Also that it is a kindness, and almost a duty, to let people think and say and do things in their own way occasionally.

But even if Mr and Mrs Skratdj had ever thought of teaching all this to their children, it must be confessed that the lesson would not have come with a good grace from either of them, since they snapped and snarled between themselves as much or more than their children in the nursery.

The two eldest were the leaders in the nursery squabbles. Between these, a boy and a girl, a ceaseless war of words was waged from morning to night. And as neither of them lacked ready wit, and both were in constant practice, the art of snapping was cultivated by them to the highest pitch.

It began at breakfast, if not sooner.

“You’ve taken my chair.”

“It’s not your chair.”

“You know it’s the one I like, and it was in my place.”

“How do you know it was in your place?”

“Never mind. I do know.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Suppose I say it was in my place.”

“You can’t, for it wasn’t.”

“I can, if I like.”

“Well, was it?”

“I sha’n’t tell you.”

“Ah! that shews it wasn’t.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does.”

Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

The direction of their daily walks was a fruitful subject of difference of opinion.

“Let’s go on the Common to-day, Nurse.”

“Oh, don’t let’s go there; we’re always going on the Common.”

“I’m sure we’re not. We’ve not been there for ever so long.”

“Oh, what a story! We were there on Wednesday. Let’s go down Gipsey Lane. We never go down Gipsey Lane.”

“Why, we’re always going down Gipsey Lane. And there’s nothing to see there.”

“I don’t care. I won’t go on the Common, and I shall go and get Papa to say we’re to go down Gipsey Lane. I can run faster than you.”

“That’s very sneaking; but I don’t care.”

“Papa! Papa! Polly’s called me a sneak.”

“No, I didn’t, Papa.”

“You did.”

“No, I didn’t. I only said it was sneaking of you to say you’d run faster than me, and get Papa to say we were to go down Gipsey Lane.”

“Then you did call him sneaking,” said Mr Skratdj. “And you’re a very naughty ill-mannered little girl. You’re getting very troublesome, Polly, and I shall have to send you to school, where you’ll be kept in order. Go where your brother wishes at once.”

For Polly and her brother had reached an age when it was convenient, if possible, to throw the blame of all nursery differences on Polly. In families where domestic discipline is rather fractious than firm, there comes a stage when the girls almost invariably go to the wall, because they will stand snubbing, and the boys will not. Domestic authority, like some other powers, is apt to be magnified on the weaker class.

But Mr Skratdj would not always listen even to Harry.

“If you don’t give it me back directly, I’ll tell about your eating the two magnum-bonums in the kitchen garden on Sunday,” said Master Harry on one occasion.

“Tell-tale tit!
Your tongue shall be slit,
And every dog in the town shall have a little bit,”

quoted his sister.

“Ah! You’ve called me a tell-tale. Now I’ll go and tell Papa. You got into a fine scrape for calling me names the other day.”

“Go, then! I don’t care.”

“You wouldn’t like me to go, I know.”

“You daren’t. That’s what it is.”

“I dare.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Oh, I am going; but you’ll see what will be the end of it.”

Polly, however, had her own reasons for remaining stolid, and Harry started. But when he reached the landing he paused. Mr Skratdj had especially announced that morning that he did not wish to be disturbed, and though he was a favourite, Harry had no desire to invade the dining-room at this crisis. So he returned to the nursery, and said with a magnanimous air, “I don’t want to get you into a scrape, Polly. If you’ll beg my pardon I won’t go.”

“I’m sure I sha’n’t,” said Polly, who was equally well informed as to the position of affairs at head-quarters. “Go, if you dare.”

“I won’t if you want me not,” said Harry, discreetly waiving the question of apologies.

“But I’d rather you went,” said the obdurate Polly. “You’re always telling tales. Go and tell now, if you’re not afraid.”

So Harry went. But at the bottom of the stairs he lingered again, and was meditating how to return with most credit to his dignity, when Polly’s face appeared through the banisters, and Polly’s sharp tongue goaded him on.

“Ah! I see you. You’re stopping. You daren’t go.”

“I dare,” said Harry; and at last he went.

As he turned the handle of the door, Mr Skratdj turned round.

“Please, Papa – ” Harry began.

“Get away with you!” cried Mr Skratdj. “Didn’t I tell you I was not to be disturbed this morning? What an extraor – ”

But Harry had shut the door, and withdrawn precipitately.

Once outside, he returned to the nursery with dignified steps, and an air of apparent satisfaction, saying, —

“You’re to give me the bricks, please.”

“Who says so?”

“Why, who should say so? Where have I been, pray?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“I’ve been to Papa. There!”

“Did he say I was to give up the bricks?”

“I’ve told you.”

“No, you’ve not.”

“I sha’n’t tell you any more.”

“Then I’ll go to Papa and ask.”

“Go by all means.”

“I won’t if you’ll tell me truly.”

“I sha’n’t tell you anything. Go and ask, if you dare,” said Harry, only too glad to have the tables turned.

Polly’s expedition met with the same fate, and she attempted to cover her retreat in a similar manner.

“Ah! you didn’t tell.”

“I don’t believe you asked Papa.”

“Don’t you? Very well!”

“Well, did you?”

“Never mind.”

Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Meanwhile Mr Skratdj scolded Mrs Skratdj for not keeping the children in better order. And Mrs Skratdj said it was quite impossible to do so, when Mr Skratdj spoilt Harry as he did, and weakened her (Mrs Skratdj’s) authority by constant interference.

Difference of sex gave point to many of these nursery squabbles, as it so often does to domestic broils.

“Boys never will do what they’re asked,” Polly would complain.

“Girls ask such unreasonable things,” was Harry’s retort.

“Not half so unreasonable as the things you ask.”

“Ah! that’s a different thing! Women have got to do what men tell them, whether it’s reasonable or not.”

“No, they’ve not!” said Polly. “At least, that’s only husbands and wives.”

“All women are inferior animals,” said Harry.

“Try ordering Mamma to do what you want, and see!” said Polly.

“Men have got to give orders, and women have to obey,” said Harry, falling back on the general principle, “And when I get a wife, I’ll take care I make her do what I tell her. But you’ll have to obey your husband when you get one.”

“I won’t have a husband, and then I can do as I like.”

“Oh, won’t you? You’ll try to get one, I know. Girls always want to be married.”

“I’m sure I don’t know why,” said Polly; “they must have had enough of men if they have brothers.”

And so they went on, *ad infinitum*, with ceaseless arguments that proved nothing and convinced nobody, and a continual stream of contradiction that just fell short of downright quarrelling.

Indeed, there was a kind of snapping even less near to a dispute than in the cases just mentioned. The little Skratdjs, like some other children, were under the unfortunate delusion that it sounds clever to hear little boys and girls snap each other up with smart sayings, and old and rather vulgar play upon words, such as:

“I’ll give you a Christmas box. Which ear will you have it on?”

“I won’t stand it.”

“Pray take a chair.”

“You shall have it to-morrow.”

“To-morrow never comes.”

And so if a visitor kindly began to talk to one of the children, another was sure to draw near and “take up” all the first child’s answers, with smart comments, and catches that sounded as silly as they were tiresome and impertinent.

And ill-mannered as this was, Mr and Mrs Skratdj never put a stop to it. Indeed, it was only a caricature of what they did themselves. But they often said, “We can’t think how it is the children are always squabbling!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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