Molesworth Mrs.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER. I

The house stood on rising ground, and the nursery was at the top of the house – except of course for the attics above – so there was a good view from the two large windows. This was a great comfort to the children during the weeks they were busy getting better from a long, very long, illness, or illnesses. For they had been so unwise as to get measles, and scarlet fever, and something else – I am not sure if it was whooping-cough or chicken-pox – all mixed up together! Don't you think they might have been content with one at a time? Their mamma thought so, and the doctor thought so, and most of all, perhaps, nurse thought so.

But when they began to get really better, they themselves weren't so sure about it. Maxie said to Dolly that he really thought it was rather clever to have finished up all the illnesses at once, and Dolly agreed with him, adding that their cousins had been nearly as long "with *only* measles." But nurse, who heard what they were saying, reminded them that instead of them "finishing

up the illnesses," as Master Max said, it might have been the illnesses finishing *them* up. Which was true enough, and made Max, who was the older of the two, look rather grave.

And then the getting better was *very* long, especially as it was early spring, and there were lots of damp and chilly days still, and for weeks and weeks there was no talk or thought of their going out, and it was very difficult indeed not to get tired of the toys and games their mother provided for them, and *even* of her very nicest stories. Besides, a mamma cannot go on telling stories all day, however sorry she is for her little invalids, and however well she understands that when people, little or big, have been ill and are still feeling weak, and "unlike themselves," it is very, *very* difficult not to be discontented and quarrelsome. So but for the nursery windows I don't quite know what the children would have done sometimes.

The windows both looked out at the same side, which was a good thing in some ways and a bad thing in others. Each child had a special one, and as Dolly said to Maxie, "if yours had been at the back, you could have told me stories of what you saw, and I could have told you stories of what I saw."

"It couldn't have looked out at the back," said Max, who was more of an architect than his sister, for he was two years older, "for it's there the nursery's joined on to the house. It could only have looked to the side, and the side's very stupid – just shrubs and beds, nothing to see except the gardeners sometimes, and p'r'aps there'd have been a scroodgy bit of seeing round to the

front, so I'd rather have it as it is. Indeed, if there had been one at the side, I wouldn't have had it for my window at all."

"You'd have had to," said Dolly, her voice sounding rather "peepy," "'cos I'm a girl, and I *hope* you're a gentleman."

"I'm the eldest," said Max, "and that always counts. Stuff about being a gentleman; the Prince of Wales won't give up being king to let his sister be queen, will he?"

This was rather a poser.

"Papa says," Dolly began, but she stopped suddenly. "Oh Maxie," she went on, in *quite* a different tone of voice, "what *is* coming into Farmer Wilder's field? It isn't turkeys this time. Oh, Maxie, what can it be?"

For they were both at their posts, though for the last few minutes Max had not been giving much attention to the outside world, and I rather fancy too, that Dolly's eyes were quicker than his.

He turned to the window now – it *was* a very nice look-out certainly, at that side of the house. First there was their own lawn, which the gardeners were now busy "machining," as the children called it, and skirting it at the right the broad terrace walk where the dogs loved to follow their father as he walked up and down, often reading as he went. Then on the left there were the "houses," where there was always some bustle of washing the glass or moving the pots, or watering or *something* going on. And though hidden from the view of the front of the house, there was, farther back, a path to the poultry-yard, where two or three

times a day their mamma's pet beauties were fed, and the noise and chatter of the pretty feathered creatures could be heard even through the closed nursery windows. For this was not the big poultry-yard, but their mother's own particular one. And most interesting of all, perhaps, further off beyond the lawn, divided from it by a "ha-ha," there was the great field let to Farmer Wilder, where all sorts of creatures were to be seen in their turn; sometimes cattle, sometimes sheep, sometimes only two or three quiet old horses. There had been nothing but horses there lately – not since the turkeys had been taken away – so it was no wonder that Dolly's eyes were caught by the sight of a sudden arrival of new-comers.

There they came – rushing, scrambling, tumbling over each other – one, two, three – no, it was impossible to count them as yet – they were just a mass of rolling jerking black specks against the green grass, and for a minute or two, the children stared and gazed and wondered, in complete silence.

What could they be?

"Are they little bears?" Dolly was on the point of saying, only she stopped short for fear of Maxie's laughing at her, as he had done that time when they were staying at their grandmamma's in London, and she had asked if it was rabbits that had nibbled the crocuses in the square gardens.

"Rabbits in London!" said Max, with lordly contempt. "What a baby you are, Dolly!"

Dolly had never forgotten it; she hated being called "a baby"

in that tone, and very likely Max would laugh even more if she asked if these strange visitors were little bears.

So she waited. Then said her brother in his grand, big man tone, as if he had known it all the time, which he hadn't —

"They're pigs – just little black pigs of course. Can't you see their curly tails, Dolly?"

"Yes," said Dolly in rather a disappointed tone, "I can, now I know they're pigs. But I thought that they were something curiouser than pigs – though," and her voice grew more cheerful again, "I never saw quite *black* pigs before, did you, Maxie? What makes them black, I wonder?"

"You've seen black men?" said Max. "Well, it's like that – there's black men and proper-coloured men, so there's black pigs and proper-coloured pigs."

"But black men are painted black. Christy minstrel men are, I know, for nurse told me so when I was frightened of them. And *pigs* couldn't paint themselves black. But oh, Max," she broke off, "do look how they're running and jumping now. They're all over the field. One, two, three, four – there's *thirteen* of them, Maxie."

"No," said Max, after a moment or two's silence, "there's only twelve."

Dolly counted again – it was not very easy, I must allow. But she stuck to it.

"There are *thirteen*," she repeated.

Two could play at that game.

"There are *twelve*, I tell you, you silly," said Max, without taking the trouble to count them again as carefully as Dolly had done.

CHAPTER II

"There are *thirteen*," repeated Dolly again. "Look, Max, begin at the side of the field nearest the gate – there are three close together, and then – oh dear, two have run back to the others, and – no, I can't count aloud, but I'm sure – " and she went on to herself, "one, two, three, four," – "there *are* thirteen, I'm as sure as sure."

"And *I'm* as sure as sure, or surer than sure, that there are only twelve," said Max, aggravatingly.

"Master Max and Miss Dorothy, come to your tea," said nurse's voice from the table. "And it's getting chilly – the evenings aren't like the middle of the day – you mustn't stand at the windows any more. It's draughty, and it would never do for you to be getting stiff necks or swollen glands or anything like that on the top of all there's been."

The two came slowly to the tea-table, but their looks were not very amiable.

"You're so rude," said Dolly to her brother, "contradicting like that. I never saw anybody so *persisting*."

"How can you help persisting when you know you're right?" said Max. "I can't tell *stories* to please you."

But I must say his tone was more good-natured than Dolly's.

"Well," said she, "can *I* tell stories to please *you*? I *know* there are thirteen."

"And I *know* there are only twelve," retorted Max, more doggedly.

After that they did not speak to each other all through tea-time. Nurse, who often complained of the chatter-chatter "going through her head," should have been pleased at the unusual quiet, but somehow she wasn't. She had a kind heart, and she did not like to see the little couple looking gloomy and cross.

"Come, cheer up, my dears," she said, "what *does* it matter? Twelve or thirteen, though I don't know what it is you were talking about – call it twelve-and-a-half and split the difference, won't that settle it?"

It was rather difficult not to smile at this suggestion – the idea of chopping one of the poor little pigs in two to settle their dispute was too absurd. But Dolly pinched up her lips; *she* wasn't going to give in, and smiling would have been a sort of *beginning* of giving in, you see. And Max, to save *him*self from any weakness of the kind, started whistling, which nurse promptly put a stop to, telling him that whistling at table was not "manners" at all!

This did not increase Master Max's good temper, especially as Dolly looked very virtuous, and as if *her* "manners" could never call for any reproof. And a quarter-of-an-hour or so later, when mamma came up to pay them a little visit, it was very plain to her that there was a screw, and rather a big screw, loose somewhere in the nursery machinery. For Max was sitting in one corner pretending to read, and Dolly was sitting in another corner – the two furthest-off-from-each-other corners they could possibly

find – pretending to sew, and on both little faces the expression was one which mammas are always very sorry indeed to see.

But mammas learn by experience to be wise. And all wise people know that when other people are "upset" or "put out," *or*, to say it quite plainly, "in a bad temper," it is no use, even though it is rather difficult not to do so, to go "bang at them," with some such questions as these: "What *is* the matter with you?" "What *are* you looking so cross about?" "Have you been quarrelling, you tiresome children?" and so on. Especially if, as these children's mamma just now was clever enough to find out, the angry feelings are beginning to soften down into unhappiness, and the first little whisper of "wishing I hadn't been so cross" – or "so unkind," is faintly making its way into the foolish, troubled little hearts. At that moment a sharp or severe word is sadly apt to drown the gentle fairy voice, and to open the door again to all the noisy, ugly imps of obstinacy and pride and unkind resentment, who were just *beginning* to think they had best slink off.

So this loving and wise – wise because she was loving, and loving because she was wise! – mother said nothing, except —

"I am so sorry not to have come up before, dears, but I have been very busy. Has it been a very dull afternoon for my poor little prisoners?"

"Not so very," said Dolly, slipping off her seat, and sidling up to her mother, who had settled herself on the old rocking-chair by the fire, with a nice comfortable look, as if she were not in a hurry. "Not so very – we read some stories, and I did six rows

of my knitting, and Max cut out some more paper animals for poor little Billy Stokes – and – then we went to our windows and began looking out," but here Dolly's voice dropped suspiciously.

"Well," said her mother, "that all sounds very nice. But what happened when you were looking out at your windows?"

"Nothing *happened*," said Max, slowly.

"Well – what did you see? And what did you *say*? I can tell from your faces that things haven't gone cheerfully with you all the afternoon – now have they?" said mamma.

"No," Dolly replied eagerly, "they haven't. Only p'r'aps we'd better say nothing more about it. I don't want it all to begin again. If Max likes I'll try to forget all about it, and be friends again."

"I don't mind being friends again," said Max, "I'd rather. But I don't see how we *can* forget about it – they're sure to be there again to-morrow, and then we *couldn't* forget about them. Oh, I wonder if they're there still, if it's not too dark to see them," he went on, suddenly darting to the window. "Then mamma could count them, and that would settle it."

"This is very mysterious," said mamma, smiling, "Dolly, you must explain."

But Max was back from the window before Dolly could begin, and his first words were part of the explanation.

"They're gone in," he said in a disappointed tone, "but I don't know that it matters much. For it would have been too dark for you to count them properly, mamma. It was a lot of little pigs, mamma, in Farmer Wilder's field; little black pigs – twelve of

them."

"*Thirteen*," said Dolly.

"No, no!" began Max, but he stopped. "That's it, you see, mamma," he said, in a melancholy tone.

"That's *what*?" asked mamma.

"The – the quarrel. Dolly will have it there were thirteen, and I'm sure there were only twelve."

"And," said Dolly, laughing a little – though I must say I think it was mischievous of her to have snapped in with that "thirteen" – "nurse heard about 'twelve' and 'thirteen,' but she didn't know what it was about, so she asked us if we couldn't split the difference. Fancy splitting up a poor little pig."

"There isn't one to split, not a *thirteen* one," said Max, rather surlily.

"Yes there is," retorted Dolly.

Mamma looked at them both.

"My dear children," she said. "You really *must* be at a loss for something to quarrel about. And after all, you remind me of – "

"What do we remind you of, mamma?" asked both, eagerly, "something about when you were a little girl?"

"No, only of an old story I have heard," said mamma.

"Oh, do tell it," said Max and Dolly.

CHAPTER III

IS scarcely a 'story,'" said

their mother, "it was only

about a tremendous quarrel

there once was in ancient

times between some people

as to what colour a certain

shield was. One party declared it was black; the other maintained it was white. Both were ready to swear to the fact, and I don't know what terrible consequences might not have followed,

had it not suddenly been discovered that – what do you think? Can you guess?"

Max and Dolly knitted their brows and pondered. But no, they could not guess.

"What was it, mamma?" they asked.

"One side of the shield was black and the other white," said she, with a quiet little smile, "so both were right and both were wrong."

The children considered. It was very interesting.

"But," said Max, "it *couldn't* be like that with Dolly and me – there couldn't be thirteen and *not* be thirteen."

"No, it is difficult, I own, to see how that could be," said mamma. "But queer things do happen – there are queer answers to puzzles now-and-then."

"I wish it was settled about ours," said Dolly, with a sigh. "I – I don't like quarrelling with dear Maxie," and she suddenly buried her face in her mother's lap and began to cry – not loudly, but you could see she was crying by the way her fat little shoulders quivered and shook.

This was too much for Max.

"Dolly," he said, tugging at her till she was obliged to look up, "*don't*– I can't bear you to be unhappy because of – because of me – do kiss me, Dolly, and don't let us ever think any more about those stupid little black pigs."

So they kissed each other, and it was "all right."

"But," said Dolly, "I'm so afraid it'll begin again when we see

them. Could papa ask Farmer Wilder to put them somewhere else, mamma? We can't leave off looking out of our windows, *can* we?"

"I think it would be rather a babyish way of keeping from quarrelling, to ask to have the temptation to quarrel put away," said mamma. "Besides – it would *have* to be settled, you see."

"Yes, but," said Dolly, "then one of us would have to be wrong, and I'd rather go on fancying that *somehow* neither of us was wrong."

"That's rubbish," said Max, "it *couldn't* be."

"Listen," said mamma; "promise me that neither of you will look out of the window to-morrow morning before you see me. Then if it is really a fine mild day, the doctor says you may both go a little walk."

"*Oh*, how nice!" interrupted the little prisoners. "And I will take you myself," their mother went on. "Immediately after your dinner – about two o'clock will be the best time. And we will see if we can't settle the question of the thir – no, I had better not say how many – of the little black pigs, in a satisfactory way."

Mamma smiled at the children – her smile was very nice, but there was a little sparkle of mischief in her eyes too. And *I* may tell *you*, in confidence, though she had not said so to Max and Dolly, that that afternoon she had passed Farmer Wilder's when she was out walking with their father, and had stood at the gate of the very field which the children saw from the nursery window, where the little black pigs were gambolling about. And Farmer

Wilder had happened to come by himself, and he and his landlord – the children's father, you understand – had had a little talk about pigs in general, and these piglings in particular. And so mamma knew more about them than Max and Dolly had any idea of.

How pleased they were when they woke the next morning to think that they were really going out for a little walk – out into the sweet fresh air again, after all these weary dreary weeks in the house. And it was really a very nice day; there was more sunshine than had been seen for some time, so that at two o'clock the children were all ready – wrapped up and eager to start when their mother peeped into the nursery to call them.

At first the feeling of being out again was so delicious it almost seemed to take away their breath, and they could not think of anything else. But after a few minutes they quieted down a little, and walked on with their mother, one at each side.

"We kept our promise, mamma," said Dolly, "we didn't look out of our windows at all this morning. Nurse let us look out of the night nursery one for a little – it's turned the other way, so we couldn't see the pigs."

"But we'll *have* to see them in a minute," said Max, "when we come out of this path we're close to the gate of the big field, you know, mamma."

"I know," said mamma, "but I want to turn the other way – down the little lane, for before we go to the field to look at the pigs, I want to speak to Farmer Wilder a moment."

A few minutes brought them to the farm, and just as they

came in sight of it, Mr. Wilder himself appeared, coming towards them. Max and Dolly started a little when they first saw him; something small and black was trotting behind him – could it be one of the piglings? Their heads were full of little black pigs, you see. No, as he came nearer, they found it was a small black dog – a new one, which they had never seen before.

"Good morning, Mr. Wilder," said their mother, "that's your new dog – Max and Dolly have not made acquaintance with him yet. 'Nigger,' you call him? He's a clever fellow, isn't he?"

"A bit too clever," replied the farmer. "He's rather too fond of meddling. Yesterday afternoon he got into the big field where we'd just turned out all the little black pigs, and he was chasing and hunting them all the time."

"They'll not get fat at that rate," said the children's mother, smiling. "What a lot of them there are – twelve, didn't you say, yesterday?"

"Yes – a dozen – nice pigs they are too," said the farmer, "perhaps it would amuse the children to see them – black pigs are rare in these parts."

He turned towards the field, Max, Dolly and their mother following.

"Mamma," said Max, eagerly, "did you hear? There's only twelve."

"But I saw *thirteen*," said Dolly.

"Yes," said mamma. "You were right as to the number of pigs, Max, but Dolly was right as to the number of black creatures

she counted, for Nigger was there. So you were wrong in your *counting*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.