

The Merrythoughts

Chapter 1

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The Merry children were always being told how lucky they were, and how blissfully happy they ought to be. They were the most envied children at their school, and when they went to parties there was great competition to sit next to them and be their partners in games. Everyone they met, of their own age, longed above all things to have parents who appeared on television. Mr. and Mrs. Merry were featured in a programme called Ask Us, and they gave advice over the air to other parents, who wrote up saying they were worried about their own children not being as happy or as good or as amusingly occupied as they felt they should be. But the truth of the matter was that the Merry Parents, as they seemed so suitably called, were so busy earning a living telling other people how to make their children enjoy life that their own

boy and girl, James and Arabella, were often dismally bored and in consequence unhappy.

They lived in a top floor flat in London, in a modern block of buildings that had no corners to explore, no possibility of secret rooms, no attics full of exciting, dusty, forgotten treasures. Everything worked smoothly at the touch of a switch or a button, and it was forbidden, in the terms of the lease, to keep any livestock more endearing than a goldfish or a caged bird. There was no garden down below, only a neatly paved courtyard without a single leaf or blade of grass to show the changing of the seasons. All James and Arabella Merry knew about the country, and the birds and animals that lived off it, was what they could glean from books, and though they were given, at Christmas and on their birthdays, books galore, their parents' wide circle of friends seemed to think they would be more interested in modern music and sculpture and pictures than in real live things. They appeared to think it would be an insult to give the children of such brilliant and intelligent parents the sort of things that ordinary children enjoyed.

Because nobody believed that they were in any way ordinary children. Miss Baxter saw to that. Miss Baxter was the Merry Parents' secretary and ran their lives completely. She announced, the moment she took charge, that anyone who appeared on television could only hold down their position by suitable publicity. They must all remember that they were in the public eye all the time, and that each

member of the family had a part to play which might never be relaxed, even at home. It was she who saw to it that the children were out of the ordinary, dressing them in clothes that were shamingly different from other people's, and insisting that their hair was cut quaintly, in short bobs with fringes, so that James was only distinguishable from Arabella because he wore trousers. At first, when they were very young, it had all seemed rather fun. Now they were both aware they were too old to wear identical, bright, chunky jerseys, over gaily coloured linen trousers in James's case and heavily embroidered dirndl skirts in Arabella's, and they were getting more and more ashamed to be known lovingly by thousands of viewers as the Merrythoughts.

They were sometimes taken into the country on Sundays, but Miss Baxter saw to it that it was always to somewhere where they could be reached by the clicking cameras of reporters, and they were warned they might not stray away from their parents' side because viewers liked to think of them as the Perfect Family. They did, on one memorable occasion, get as far away from London as the New Forest, after which a photograph appeared in a daily paper entitled 'The Merrythoughts make a new friend,' showing the children feeding a pony that strayed on to the road. The photograph was a great success, bringing in an even greater batch of letters than usual, and resulted in a programme all about children being encouraged to look after their own pets. The programme in its turn provoked a flood of letters about

those same pets and the children who owned them, who, it seemed, practically omitted to feed and groom themselves, so wrapped up were they in all sizes and shapes of horseflesh, from Shetland ponies to hunters standing 15.1.

For James and Arabella themselves the expedition, so looked forward to, had turned into a torment. They could not get out of their memories the feel of the pony's coat under their fingers, rough yet silky, the touch of the velvety, questing muzzle, the look in the big liquid eyes. They did not know that the pony belonged to a privately owned herd. They thought it was a stray, like the homeless cats they sometimes saw in London, which they longed to take in and establish with a saucer of milk in a basket by the artificial log fire in their square, pale- coloured drawing-room, which was kept as tidy, by Miss Baxter, as if it might be thrown on the screen at any moment, featuring the Merrys at afternoon tea.

All the way home they discussed in whispers in the back of the car how the little brown mare might be conveyed back to London, how she could then be kept, perhaps in one of the old stables now converted into garages. They were given ample pocket money, because every time their father saw them looking bored he felt, poor man, that the only thing he could do was to plunge his hand deep into his pocket, and they thought they could afford enough hay and oats to feed so small a pony, with something left over for books to teach them something about riding and stable management. They were both very silent when they got home, from worrying

about whether the pony was starving where she was, and how it was going to be possible to make the necessary arrangements for her rescue. Miss Baxter thought it was car-sickness, and said they must not go so far afield again.

The grown-up Merrys were out that night, at a party given by theatrical friends, so they did not know that Arabella had shed tears in bed, and that James, who was two years younger, only ten, did not know how to comfort her, beyond revealing the fact that he had seventeen and tenpence in his money box.

At school next day they put the problem to a girl called Elaine Markham, whom they did not know very well but had always envied, because her parents had a week-end cottage in the country where she was able to keep a pony of her own. It turned out, when they had plucked up the courage to speak to her, that she, in her turn, envied them, thinking they led the sort of life she most desired for herself, and she told them, without snubbing them too royally, that the ponies in the New Forest all belonged to someone and were properly looked after, grazing at will all the summer and fed in the winter when there was snow on the ground. She added that they were eventually sold.

“Why don’t you ask your parents to buy you one?” she suggested. “You could keep a pony in London, and ride it in the Row—if you happen to be all that rich,” she added, perfectly certain that the Merrys must be very rich indeed, with so much desirable publicity. And it did not occur to her

that if you have one thing to make life exciting you nearly always had to do without something else.

But really it was impossible to ask their parents for anything in particular, because Miss Baxter was always telling them so firmly that their father and mother could not appear to viewers as the Merry Parents, always gay and amusing and helpful, if they were in the least bit worried about what went on at home. The children had to realise, she frequently said, that the whole family was a team, all fighting together to keep a position hardly won, in the teeth of great competition, and equally hard to maintain. A request for a pony would upset them, since, of course, they would have to say no, and it would be like the time Arabella had made a fuss because she had seen a puppy in a pet shop, the last of a litter, shivering miserably in not enough straw and clearly left alone in the shop all through the long, dark, cold nights.

The answer would undoubtedly have to be no, because Miss Baxter would marshal all the arguments: expense, and lack of time, and the fact that neither of the children knew how to ride nor the first thing about looking after any creature more exacting than a goldfish. Miss Baxter would see they were taken to a puppet show or a children's concert, so that she could assure their parents they had had their minds taken off the subject, and after that it would be ungrateful to bring the matter up ever again. It might provoke a reminder of the effect Arabella's behaviour over the puppy had had, when her mother had cried, making her eyes red

before the evening's performance, saying it was dreadful to spend your life telling other parents how to make their children contented when you couldn't give happiness to your own. That must never happen again.

And in any case, Arabella felt, if a pony from the New Forest were bought for them after the appearance of the photograph it would not really be their pony at all, but just another Merry Story. Its name would very soon be given to the public, and all sorts of silly and untrue anecdotes would be told about it, so that very soon it would become a Pony with a Personality, almost human, and then, of course, it would cease to be what they wanted, which was something wild and secret and entirely their own. Now they could be assured that that particular pony was not lost and starving they could do without it, but to have given up the idea of that one did not mean they did not deeply desire one, sometime, of their very own, their very own and not the Public's.

"I tell you what," Elaine said. She went rather pink, remembering that though the Merrys were younger than she was and wore what she and her friends called sippy clothes they were also very famous, their very birthday and Christmas presents of interest in thousands of homes. "I'll ask Mummy if you can come and stay for a week-end. Then you could see my pony. He's New Forest. Chestnut. 13.2. He's quite quiet. You could ride him in the paddock if you like. As a matter of fact I only got him because Mummy saw your parents on the tele, saying children should be allowed

to follow their own bents and have lots of interests. You ought to go on at them, too, like I did, if you want a pony all that badly. I mean, if they say in public children ought to have what they want ... ”

Neither James nor Arabella ever boasted that they were part of a team, as Miss Baxter called it, that was nation-famous, but Arabella was moved to say now, rather stiffly, that anything that made difficulties, or worries, for their parents was out of the question, because of the show. “And we do get a lot—as much as Mummy and Daddy can give us,” she said loyally, remembering with a pang she had been selfish enough to make her mother cry and perhaps had not been grateful enough the next day to her father, when he had presented her with an almost life-like toy puppy, complete in a miniature basket.

She suddenly felt she didn't like Elaine Markham very much, after all, but she was excited by the invitation all the same. It would be wonderful to go and stay at a real country cottage, with a pony in the paddock and probably other animals as well. It might mean a struggle with Miss Baxter, who seemed to look upon them both just as what she called a commercial asset, and who had probably seen to it that all the week-ends stretching from the present, June, until the days began to shorten in September were booked up for visits to places where there were going to be lots of people all eager to watch a human story going on under their very eyes. But to want to go and stay with a school friend, if they could now

call Elaine Markham that, could neither hurt their parents' feelings nor be difficult to organise.

"I'll ask Mummy to write," Elaine said hurriedly, as the bell rang for the end of the break. "Only—" She looked meaningfully at their beautifully laundered and starched clothes, embroidered by peasants in faraway countries that none of them would ever see, because to go any distance away from civilisation meant, or so Miss Baxter said, Dropping Out— "Well, you see, if you want to ride and all that ... I mean, I wear jodhs all day in the country and a proper shirt. Of course I know your clothes are wizard—Mummy's going to get me a Merrythought blouse for parties—but in the country ... " She could not help tossing her workmanlike brown plaits, which for months past had been making Arabella feel inferior every time she combed her own quaintly cut hair. She did not need to say anything else to complete the ruin of their self-confidence, and they went back to their class-rooms with a lot of the pleasure in the projected visit overlaid.

Some of the older children at their school, made unkind by envy, would whisper that the Merry kids were too beautiful to live, not realising they would willingly wear glasses or have bars across their teeth if by doing so they could lead a more ordinary life, out of the public eye. If they hadn't been, some years before, uncommonly beautiful children, their parents might not have been encouraged to earn their living in that particular way.

James, of course, was now suffering more than Arabella, because to start with he felt ashamed of being, at his age, at a school where there were more girls than boys, and because he might never admit to anyone, except his own sister, that he really disliked being photographed with his mother's arm round him, or hand in hand with Arabella. He knew, too, from Miss Baxter, who made all arrangements, from what they were to have for breakfast onwards, that ultimately he would be sent to a public school, and he dreaded the thought of arriving among four hundred or so boys who had been normally educated from the age of about eight: who could play games and use their hands for something more useful than painting, playing the piano, and modelling in plasticine, occupations which seemed to take up the greater part of the day at the school chosen for them by Miss Baxter. He was afraid it would be considered bad publicity for his famous parents if he became just like everyone else, with neatly cropped hair and a grey flannel suit. He quite often had nightmares about actually arriving at some great school, still, as it were, handcuffed to Arabella by being labelled part of the perfect family group, with his hair cut in a bang, and wearing embroidered braces over what was more nearly a blouse than a shirt. The three years that must elapse before he went to a real school would pass all too quickly, and so far he had never held a cricket bat, or kicked a football, nor had he been on a pony or looked down the barrel of a gun or tied on bait or fly. The trouble was that Miss Baxter, and all

the people who themselves got something out of the Merry Parents' continued success, could not bring themselves to admit that the Merry Children were growing up.

But this visit, if it came off, to a perfectly ordinary house in the country, might be the beginning of being rather more like other children. Mr. Markham might be kind enough to show James at least the implements of manly sports, show him how to handle gun or rod or bat, and there would be the pony, and they could forget all about being famous.

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