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The Friendly Playmate

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The bushes on the hillside were full of ripe, juicy berries, and the four children from Espesett Farm had gone to have a berry feast one bright September afternoon. The eldest of the children was a big boy of ten, the youngest was a sturdy baby of two years. When they had found a good place, they put the baby on the heather and gave her a little cup made of birch bark. Into this, one or another of the children would put a few berries from time to time so that the baby should be as happy as they were. My, what a feast they were having!



Not far from where the children were, a burly brown animal had been lying on some thick moss. When he heard the voices of the berry-pickers, he stretched himself lazily, blinking at the bright sun, got up and walked clumsily along on his thick stumpy legs. Up the hill he went, stopping to eat what berries he could find on his way.



He soon came to the place where the children were, and one of them called out, "Oh, see the funny big brown pig! How good-natured he looks!" The animal came nearer, but he seemed so friendly that the children never thought of chasing him away. In fact, they liked having him with them.

The baby was the only one who did not like him, and no wonder, for the big creature went to her, lay down on the heather close beside her and began to eat the berries from her birch-bark cup. At first, the baby tried to tell him to go away, but when he still kept on eating her berries, she put her small fist against his face, pushing him from her with all her might. Still he did not move. Then the baby got very angry and began to scream lustily.

Finally, the creature seemed to understand that the baby did not like him and did not want him so near; so he obligingly walked off a little way and sat down on his haunches. Then he looked about in a friendly manner, as if he would say,

"I won't bother the baby any more."

The children were delighted with his kindly looks and thought it would be a pity to let him sit there without any berries; so when they brought more berries to the baby, they brought some to the "pig" too. At first, they dropped the berries into his big mouth, but soon they would put their little hands full of berries right inside his mouth, which he held wide open till the hand was withdrawn. Not a scratch, even, did one of the children get from the sharp teeth.



By and by, when the children had eaten all the berries they wanted, they looked about for something else to do. A beautiful little pine tree full of cones stood not far from their clump of bushes, and Hans, the biggest boy, began throwing stones at the cones, trying to make some of them fall down. Like other country children, these children from Espesett Farm found cones to be very good playthings. With little sticks for legs and horns, cows and pigs and other animals could be made from them.

Hans could not bring down many cones by his stone-throwing, and the friendly brown "pig" seemed to understand what the boy wanted, so he went to the tree and shook it a little. A few cones fell, but as if he thought these were not enough, he stood on his hind legs, took hold of the tree with his forepaws, and shook it violently. This brought a great shower of cones to the ground, and the children were delighted. They thought their new playfellow was very clever and very kind to do this for them, so they patted and praised him, gathered all the cones they wanted, and made enough animals to stock their play farm.

Then they started towards home, their brown friend keeping them company. Soon they came to a large old tree, near whose roots was a big ant hill. Here their friend stopped and began to poke his nose under the tree roots and to lick up the eggs of the ants, which he seemed to like very much. The ants, however, were not at all pleased to have their home disturbed and their eggs eaten, so they came out in great swarms, running not only over the ground but up the brown beast's legs and all over his body.

When the child next older than the baby saw that a great many of the ants were crawling over their good playfellow's back, she got a little branch with leaves on it and began brushing his rough brown coat to get the ants off.

While she was doing this, a voice sounded through the clear air. It was Helga, the milkmaid at the farm, sending the cows back to the pasture after they had been milked.

As soon as their brown friend heard this sound, he turned away from the children and hurried off toward the woods. The children tried to get him to come back, but he paid no attention to their coaxing calls, and they were surprised to see how fast he could run on his stumpy legs. Then they, too, hurried home to tell what a good time they had had with the funny brown "pig" that had played with them so nicely all the afternoon.



Mother and Father listened with astonishment. Could all this be true? And as Father asked questions about their playfellow, Mother's face grew white, though the children did not notice this, nor did they see Father take his gun as he went out.

On his way to the berry-bushes, he saw a bed of moss where a heavy beast had evidently been lying. The footprints of a heavy beast were also plain, from this mossy bed to the bushes where the children had been. Next, he found the small pine tree with its trunk deeply scratched and marred from sharp claws, and on the ground about were many cones which had evidently just been shaken from the tree.

Following the tracks, Father found the big ant hill where the ants were still running about as if in great trouble, and holes in the ground where the beast had poked his nose under the roots to get at the ant eggs. From here, the animal's tracks led toward the forest, so the father returned home.

The children's playfellow had evidently been a clever, good-natured bear instead of the brown pig they had thought him. And luckily not a dangerous one.

Do you think the children ever forgot their friendly brown playmate? Indeed, they did not. They often talked about him and told other children about him, and now that they are grown up, there is no tale that their children like better to hear than this true story of the afternoon when the big brown bear and they had such a happy time together.

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