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opening extract from

sheep pig

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Chapter One
'Guess My Weight'

'What's that noise?' said Mrs Hogget, sticking her comfortable round red face out of the kitchen window. 'Listen, there 'tis again, did you hear it, what a racket, what a row, anybody'd think someone was being murdered, oh dearie me, whatever is it, just listen to it, will you?'

Farmer Hogget listened. From the usually quiet valley below the farm came a medley of sounds: the oompah oompah of a brass

band, the shouts of children, the rattle and thump of a skittle alley, and every now and then a very high, very loud, very angry-sounding squealing lasting perhaps ten seconds.

Farmer Hogget pulled out an old pocket-watch as big round as a saucer and looked at it. 'Fair starts at two,' he said. 'It's started.'

'I knows that,' said Mrs Hogget, 'because I'm late now with all theseyer cakes and jams and pickles and preserves as is meant to be on the Produce Stall this very minute, and who's going to take them there, I'd like to know, why you are, but afore you does, what's that noise?'

The squealing sounded again.

'That noise?'

Mrs Hogget nodded a great many times. Everything that she did was done at great length, whether it was speaking or simply nodding her head. Farmer Hogget, on the

other hand, never wasted his energies or his words.

'Pig,' he said.

Mrs Hogget nodded a lot more.

'I thought 'twas a pig, I said to meself that's a pig that is, only nobody round here do keep pigs, 'tis all sheep for miles about, what's a pig doing, I said to meself, anybody'd think they was killing the poor thing, have a look when you take all this stuff down, which you better do now, come and give us a hand, it can go in the back of the Land Rover, 'tisn't raining, 'twon't hurt, wipe your boots afore you comes in.'

'Yes,' said Farmer Hogget.

When he had driven down to the village and made his delivery to the Produce Stall, Farmer Hogget walked across the green, past the Hoopla Stall and the Coconut Shy and the Aunt Sally and the skittles and the

band, to the source of the squealing noise, which came every now and again from a small pen of hurdles in a far corner, against the churchyard wall.

By the pen sat the Vicar, notebook in hand, a cardboard box on the table in front of him. On the hurdles hung a notice – 'Guess my weight. Ten pence a go.' Inside was a little pig.

As Farmer Hogget watched, a man leaned over and picked it out of the pen. He hefted it in both hands, frowning and pursing his lips in a considering way, while all the time the piglet struggled madly and yelled blue murder. The moment it was put down, it quietened. Its eyes, bright intelligent eyes, met the farmer's. They regarded one another.

One saw a tall thin brown-faced man with very long legs, and the other saw a small fat pinky-white animal with very short ones.

'Ah, come along, Mr Hogget!' said the Vicar. 'You never know, he could be yours for ten pence. Guess his weight correctly, and at the end of the day you could be taking him home!'

'Don't keep pigs,' said Farmer Hogget. He stretched out a long arm and scratched its back. Gently, he picked it up and held it before his face. It stayed quite still and made no sound.

'That's funny,' said the Vicar. 'Every time so far that someone has picked him up he's screamed his head off. He seems to like you. You'll have to have a guess.'

Carefully, Farmer Hogget put the piglet back in the pen. Carefully, he took a ten pence piece from his pocket and dropped it in the cardboard box. Carefully, he ran one finger down the list of guesses already in the Vicar's notebook.

'Quite a variation,' said the Vicar.

'Anything from twenty pounds to forty, so far.' He wrote down 'Mr Hogget' and waited, pencil poised.

Once again, slowly, thoughtfully, the farmer picked the piglet up.

Once again, it remained still and silent.

'Thirty-one pounds,' said Farmer Hogget. He put the little pig down again. 'And a quarter,' he said.

'Thirty-one and a quarter pounds. Thank you, Mr Hogget. We shall be weighing the little chap at about half past four.'

'Be gone by then.'

'Ah well, we can always telephone you. If you should be lucky enough to win him.'

'Never win nothing.'

As he walked back across the green, the sound of the pig's yelling rang out as someone else had a go.

'You do never win nothing,' said Mrs Hogget

at tea-time, when her husband, in a very few words, had explained matters, 'though I've often thought I'd like a pig, we could feed un on scraps, he'd come just right for Christmas time, just think, two nice hams, two sides of bacon, pork chops, kidneys, liver, chitterling, trotters, save his blood for black pudding, there's the phone.'

Farmer Hogget picked it up.

'Oh,' he said.

Chapter Two

'There. Is That Nice?'

In the farmyard, Fly the black and white collie was beginning the training of her four puppies. For some time now they had shown an instinctive interest in anything that moved, driving it away or bringing it back, turning it to left or right, in fact herding it. They had begun with such things as passing beetles, but were now ready, Fly considered, for larger creatures.

She set them to work on Mrs Hogget's ducks.

Already the puppies were beginning to move as sheep-dogs do, seeming to creep rather than walk, heads held low, ears pricked, eyes fixed on the angrily quacking birds as they manoeuvred them about the yard.

'Good boys,' said Fly. 'Leave them now. Here comes the boss.'

The ducks went grumbling off to the pond, and the five dogs watched as Farmer Hogget got out of the Land Rover. He lifted something out of a crate in the back, and carried it into the stables.

'What was that, Mum?' said one of the puppies.

'That was a pig.'

'What will the boss do with it?'

'Eat it,' said Fly, 'when it's big enough.'

'Will he eat us,' said another rather nervously, 'when we're big enough?'

'Bless you,' said his mother. 'People only eat stupid animals. Like sheep and cows and

ducks and chickens. They don't eat clever ones like dogs.'

'So pigs are stupid?' said the puppies.

Fly hesitated. On the one hand, having been born and brought up in sheep country, she had in fact never been personally acquainted with a pig. On the other, like most mothers, she did not wish to appear ignorant before her children.

'Yes,' she said. 'They're stupid.'

At this point there came from the kitchen window a long burst of words like the rattle of a machine-gun, answered by a single shot from the stables, and Farmer Hogget emerged and crossed the yard towards the farmhouse with his loping stride.

'Come on,' said the collie bitch. 'I'll show you.'

The floor of the stables had not rung to a horse's hoof for many years, but it was a useful place for storing things. The hens

foraged about there, and sometimes laid their eggs in the old wooden mangers; the swallows built their nests against its roof-beams with mud from the duckpond; and rats and mice lived happy lives in its shelter until the farm cats cut them short. At one end of the stables were two loose-boxes with boarded sides topped by iron rails. One served as a kennel for Fly and her puppies. The other sometimes housed sick sheep. Here Farmer Hogget had shut the piglet.

A convenient stack of straw bales allowed the dogs to look down into the box through the bars.

'It certainly looks stupid,' said one of the puppies, yawning. At the sound of the words the piglet glanced up quickly. He put his head on one side and regarded the dogs with sharp eyes. Something about the sight of this very small animal standing all by itself in the middle of the roomy loose-box touched Fly's

soft heart. Already she was sorry that she had said that pigs were stupid, for this one certainly did not appear to be so. Also there was something dignified about the way it stood its ground, in a strange place, confronted with strange animals. How different from the silly sheep, who at the mere sight of a dog would run aimlessly about, crying 'Wolf! Wolf!' in their empty-headed way.

'Hullo,' she said. 'Who are you?'

'I'm a Large White,' said the piglet.

'Blimey!' said one of the puppies. 'If that's a large white, what's a small one like?' And they all four sniggered.

'Be quiet!' snapped Fly. 'Just remember that five minutes ago you didn't even know what a pig was.' And to the piglet she said kindly, 'I expect that's your breed, dear. I meant, what's your name?'

'I don't know,' said the piglet.

'Well, what did your mother call you, to tell you apart from your brothers and sisters?' said Fly and then wished she hadn't, for at the mention of his family the piglet began to look distinctly unhappy. His little forehead wrinkled and he gulped and his voice trembled as he answered.

'She called us all the same.'

'And what was that, dear?'

'Babe,' said the piglet, and the puppies began to giggle until their mother silenced them with a growl.

'But that's a lovely name,' she said. 'Would you like us to call you that? It'll make you feel more at home.'

At this last word the little pig's face fell even further.

'I want my mum,' he said very quietly.

At that instant the collie bitch made up her mind that she would foster this unhappy child.