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THE GRUMPY NEIGHBOURS

When they first arrived the Churpies named the place Green Meadows. It certainly was in comparison to where they lived before. That had been alright to start with, but after too many years with very little rain everything had dried up, even the creek. This new valley seemed ideal for them and the river flowing into it, though only quite narrow, was crystal clear and would provide plenty of water not only for drinking but also enabling them to grow all kinds of crops. The Churpies, you see, were mainly farmers. As it came to pass, what they eventually grew was bigger and better than ever before encouraging another family to join them.

The Churpies didn't have a problem with this. They were a cheerful bunch and had always got along with almost everyone, particularly the Jollie family which they already knew. Their arrival was a delight for the Churpie children because it renewed old friendships and gave them someone else to play with. It was a different story, however, the day a new lot came trudging into the valley. The moment she noticed them, Ma Churpie called the children together. "Get ready to greet our new neighbours and make them welcome."

The announcement stirred great excitement among the children until Noddy the oldest one said: "I don't think that will go down too well. I recognise them – they're the Groaners."

"Oh, no! They were always whingeing," said Noddy's sister Winkin.

"And they had nothing good to say about anything," added the other sister Blinkin.

"That's as maybe," put in Pa Churpie, "But it's no reason to be rude and we shouldn't ignore them. Anyway, it's been a while: they may have changed for the better."

Hoping for the best, the Jollie family joined the Churpies as they waited for the Groaners to arrive. The new arrivals came to a halt before the welcoming committee. "What's all this?" snarled one of them who was probably the father.

"Nothing really - we're just being friendly," said Pa Churpie. He waved a hand behind him. "There's plenty of land still left so you can pick where you'd care to set up."

The grumpy Groaner sneered. "We won't be stopping," he declared flatly and turned to glance at the hill rising up from the back of the valley. "We'll take the high ground," then he barked at his family: "Come on. There's work to do."

Although that seemed to put a damper on the moment, while the grown-ups were talking two of the Groaner children had made their way to the front and actually had smiles on their faces. Noddy Churpie stepped forward and said: "Hello. What are your names?"

One of the Groaner children replied: "I'm Dilbert and this is my brother Winsted."

Winkin joined in with a suggestion: "Once you're settled maybe you'd like to come and play with us? Later in the week we're going to have boat races on the river."

The Groaner brothers were obviously keen on the idea because their faces lit up. "You sail boats then?" queried Winsted.

"Well, not big boats," explained Blinkin. "We make them out of sticks and grass and leaves then we put them in the river and let the current take them downstream. The one that gets to the finish line first is the winner."

"That sounds great," said Dilbert turning to a Groaner who might have been his mother and pleaded: "Can we?"

The grown-up scowled and grated: "That won't be happening. You know you're not allowed to mix with other children, and you definitely won't have time to play - you have to help us set up." Clearly disappointed, Dilbert and Winsted turned and trooped along with the rest of the family as they headed towards the hill.

The Churpies and the Jollies stood watching for a while. Ma Churpie said: "I wonder why they chose to live on the hill? I don't imagine they'll be able to grow much up there."

"I suppose they must know what they're doing," commented Pa Churpie, "Anyway, it isn't really our business. Best get moving - those apples won't pick themselves..."

Life for the Churpie children continued pretty much the same as always. There was schooling, of course, and after that they had chores in the home and helping around the farm before it was playtime. It was a little different up on the hill. Because the Groaners were starting from scratch a house had to be built and the job of Dilbert and Winsted was to cart wood from where it was being cut. Once that was done they were given the task of preparing the first growing area. It was mainly pulling weeds and meant much bending which was both hard and boring. "This is going to take us ages," moaned Winsted, straightening up to look around the huge patch of weeds, "And my back's aching. I vote we have a break."

Dilbert looked towards where the house was being built. "Why don't we do a bit of exploring while the grown-ups are busy?" he suggested. "I'm sure they won't notice." So, over the coming days they did just that whenever the opportunity arose. Their exploration eventually took them to a high point on the hill where there was a steep cliff that fell quite sharply down to the river. Mindful of what the Churpies had told them about the boat race the boys frequently returned to keep watch on the river; but for a while nothing happened; until one day as they were approaching the cliff sounds could be heard - mainly children laughing. On investigation they were able to see the Churpies and the Jollies down below getting ready for the boat race.

They had already made their boats, all different shapes and sizes; some even had sails made of leaves, and these were lined up on the river bank. Dilbert frowned. "Why are they all standing there waiting?" he pondered.

As if in answer to his question, Blinkin came running towards the group of children, calling out: "I've strung the rope across the river, so the finish line's ready. It's time to start the race. Get the stick Winkin." What she meant was a long stick that they kept close by. This was lowered so that it sat on both banks and formed a barrier across the river.

The Groaner boys were puzzled. "What's the stick for do you reckon?" wondered Dilbert.

"Don't know," replied Winsted. "We'll just have to wait and see." In a minute or two it became clear. "They're putting the boats behind the stick," he announced unnecessarily. "I guess it's there to stop them floating downstream until the race is ready to start."

"Why don't we give them a wave," suggested Dilbert, shuffling closer to the edge of the cliff. His brother joined him and both of them called out and started waving.

The children below heard and looked up. "It's Dilbert and Winsted," said Noddy returning the wave. "It's a pity they aren't allowed to be down here with us."

"No, but they should have a good view of the race from up there..." Blinkin began, then gasped. "Oh, no! They're slipping!"

Sure enough the Groaner boys had lost their footing on the soft edge and were sliding down the cliff face! Lower they slid, clutching at rocks and cracks to slow their fall. Mouths open wide and holding their breath the Churpie and Jollie children watched, expecting the boys would tumble right down to the river. Suddenly they stopped. They had reached a narrow ledge about half way down the cliff. Hearts pounding, they flattened themselves against the rock face.

"We've got to do something," urged Winkin.

"Well, we can't climb up there to help them," said Polly Jollie.

"No, but we might be able to pull them up from the top of the cliff," suggested Noddy. "We could use the finish-line rope."

Off they all ran, back along the river bank, Blinkin untying the rope in passing, then joining the others to climb the hill. Ma Churpie had seen them. "I wonder what the children are up to?" she asked her husband.

"No idea," said Pa Churpie, "But we'd better go after them. They won't be very welcome when the Groaners see them coming."

That was certainly the case when the Churpies who were first in line reached the spot where the new house was being built. "What are you doing here?" the Groaner father demanded to know. "You weren't invited."

Undeterred by the hostility, Noddy said: "It's Dilbert and Winsted. They've fallen off the top of the cliff and they're stuck halfway down. We've come to rescue them – we've got a rope."

The Groaner mother grumbled: "What were they doing on the cliff top? They were supposed to be pulling weeds."

The Churpie's parents had just managed to catch up and Pa said: "Does it really matter now? Your boys are in danger, so you can either come and help or stand around whingeing." Turning to his children he asked: "Which way?"

Noddy pointed and started running up the hill with the other children close behind. Soon enough they were at the top of the cliff. Noddy was giving out the orders: "Winkin, check out where Dilbert and Winsted are, but be careful. Blinkin, you're not as heavy as us so I suggest we lower you down on the end of the rope. Will you be okay with that?"

The grown-ups stood back watching. The Groaner mother had a deep frown on her face and spoke aside to Ma Churpie: "Are you happy with your children taking charge? Shouldn't you be doing that?"

Ma extended her a nervous smile and said: "We trust them, don't we Pa?"

"We do," confirmed Pa Churpie, "And I'm sure they'll get your boys back up safely. Just be patient and give the children a chance. Now, I think we grown-ups ought to give them a hand to hold the rope..."

The rescue went reasonably smoothly except for the odd gasp of concern when Blinkin was being lowered down the cliff face and she slipped; but with the rope tied around her waist it was nothing major. Eventually she reached the two Groaner boys. "I want you to hold onto me very tightly," she said to Winsted. "When they've pulled us up to the top I'll come back for you, Dilbert."

Once the boys were brought up to safety there was great jubilation, not just from the Churpie and Jollie families, but surprisingly the Groaner parents plus an aunt and uncle also seemed overjoyed. "Thank you so much," said the mother, "And I hope you silly boys have learned your lesson."

Pa Churpie had an idea: "I believe this calls for a celebration. What do you say?" he said to the father Groaner, then added: "Er... I'm sorry but I don't know your name."

"Herbert," replied the Groaner. "As for celebrations it's not something we usually do." He turned to mother Groaner. "What do you think, Nora?"

"Why not?" she replied. She glanced at her two boys and saw that they were chatting and laughing with the other children. "Dilbert and Winsted seem to be getting on well with the Churpies and the Jollies. I see no reason they can't play together; do you Herbert?"

"Hmm," Herbert pondered for just a moment. "But only after they've finished their work," he said scowling at the boys; then he burst out laughing.

And that set the scene for a particularly happy future both in the valley and up on the hill; and it was to continue for a very long time.