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THE FOX AND THE CHICKENS

When Fred and Marion Jones took their family and moved to Greengrove Farm they all thought it would be fun. It was to begin with, much better than living in the city, and there was always plenty to do. Even the children helped around the place, although jobs like cleaning the house and washing up the dishes weren't exactly fun. But there were other things that were, and they all enjoyed feeding the chickens and collecting their eggs. Everything was going fine until one particular day. The older children, Jenny and Michael, were at school as usual. Their little sister Pippa was too young for school and would spend her time playing in the back garden. Her parents knew she would be quite safe because Pippa was never alone. Skip the dog always stayed close by, watching to make sure little Pippa didn't wander off or get herself into trouble. So, when Marion looked out of the kitchen window and saw the dog sitting on his own in the yard by the chicken-house, she began to worry. A quick check of the back garden made her more worried still because Pippa was nowhere to be seen. "Fred!" she called out, "Quickly! Pippa's gone missing!"

The two parents searched all over but couldn't find their little daughter. "She can't have just disappeared," said Fred, "She must be somewhere."

"What I don't understand is why she isn't with Skip," said Marion, "They are always together."

"Not now they aren't," grumbled Fred looking down at the dog in dismay, "I reckon Skip's too old to look after Pippa, or anything anymore. Maybe we should think about getting a younger dog."

"Well," said Marion, sounding rather annoyed, "That won't help us now. We have to find Pippa." She crouched down beside the dog and spoke gently: "Where is she, old fella? Where's Pippa?"

"As if he's going to tell you," snorted Fred.

It seemed, however, that Skip was about to do just that, but in his own way. He stood up and began walking towards the chicken-house, then he stopped to look back. Fred and Marion Jones were just standing there, so Skip gave a short bark, then turned and carried on walking,

pausing once or twice to make sure the two humans were following. He led them past the chicken-house, and headed towards the fence alongside the orchard. There, he sat down looking at the apple trees and gave another small bark. Marion noticed movement in the orchard, and she saw something that made her gasp. "Pippa's under the apple trees, and there's a strange dog with her!"

"Oh, no!" said Fred, as he rushed for the fence and started to climb over, "That's not a dog - it's a fox! Get away, you beast!" he shouted, "Leave our little girl alone!" Marion scrambled over the fence too and they both raced to where Pippa was sitting. As they did, the fox ran off into the orchard. Marion picked up her little girl and said: "She doesn't seem to be hurt, thank goodness."

"Small wonder," said Fred, and he looked at Skip with a scowl on his face, "And what about you? You must have seen the fox, so why didn't you chase it away? Useless dog!" And with that, they took Pippa back to the house with Skip following well behind, figuring he had done something wrong, but not knowing exactly what.

They told Jenny and Michael what had happened when the two children returned home from school, and their father added: "We were lucky this time, but with a fox around we'll need to be extra careful. We don't want it eating the chickens."

"Jeffrey wouldn't do that," said Jenny, "He doesn't like meat."

"No, he doesn't," explained Michael, "We tried giving him some of Skip's food but he turned his nose up at it."

"Jeffrey prefers fruit," said Jenny, "Especially bananas."

"And he loved the cheese sandwich I gave him yesterday," chirped in Michael.

The parents were stunned. "Can I believe what I'm hearing?" said Marion, frowning in confusion at her husband, "Our children have not only been feeding a fox, but they've actually given it a name!"

"It's crazy," said Fred, "And what kind of a name is Jeffrey for a fox?"

"That was Pippa's idea," said Jenny, "At least that's what we thought she called him when they were playing together."

"Let me get this straight," said their father, "You let Pippa play with a dangerous wild animal! What were you thinking?"

"Jeffrey's not dangerous," said Jenny.

"And he's not wild," added Michael, "He's a very friendly fox."

"Rubbish!" snorted Fred, "All foxes are wild, and they're all dangerous. And here's another thing: no matter what you believe, they do eat chickens!"

"Not Jeffrey!" said Jenny. "If you still won't believe us, we can show you."

The family trooped out of the house and across the yard. Just as they were nearing the chicken-house, Fred almost exploded. "He's back again! The cheek of it! See him off, Skip!" The farmer looked around, but Skip had gone. "Where is that useless dog when you need him?" When he looked again, the fox had gone too. "He must be after the chickens!" said Fred, rushing towards the chicken-house.

Marion was there before him, but instead of being worried as he thought she should be, she was smiling. "Will you just look at this, Fred. It's quite unbelievable, and very cute."

When he saw, Fred had to agree. There were Skip and Jeffrey, guiding the little chicks towards the chickens who simply waited until all of their children were with them before taking them to the chicken-house. If any of the chicks strayed, Jeffrey nudged them with his nose towards the others. Once all of the chickens and chicks were inside, Skip pushed the door closed with his paw, then Jeffrey went and sat down in front of it. "If it wasn't so strange," said Marion, "I'd say Jeffrey was guarding the chickens."

"It's not strange," said Jenny, "That's what he does, every night."

"So," said Michael, "Can we keep him? Please."

"Hmm," murmured their father, "I suppose so. At least we won't need to get another dog. But there's one condition," he added, sounding quite stern, but with a little smile on his lips, "Don't you go telling anybody about it. If word gets out that Fred Jones of Greengrove Farm has a fox for a guard-dog, everyone will be laughing at me." As he started walking away, he was muttering quietly to himself: "Jeffrey! Surely they could have thought of a better name for a fox - something like Fang, or Red, but Jeffrey...?"