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# **The Colour of Milk**

Written by Nell Leyshon

Published by Fig Tree

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*the colour of milk*

NELL LEYSHON



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## FIG TREE

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*spring*

this is my book and i am writing it by my own hand.

in this year of lord eighteen hundred and thirty one i am reached the age of fifteen and i am sitting by my window and i can see many things. i can see birds and they fill the sky with their cries. i can see the trees and i can see the leaves.

and each leaf has veins which run down it.

and the bark of each tree has cracks.

i am not very tall and my hair is the colour of milk.

my name is mary and i have learned to spell it. m. a. r. y.  
that is how you letter it.

i want to tell you what it is that happened but i must be ware not to rush at it like the heifers at the gate for if i do that i will get ahead of my self so quick that i will trip and fall and anyway you will want me to start where a person ought to.

and that is at the beginning.

the year was eighteen hundred and thirty by the years of our lord. and my father lived on a farm and he had four daughters of which i am the one who was born most recent of all.

also living in the house was a mother and a grandfather.

we were not within the habit of letting animals to live in the house though sometimes the small sheep would come in if they lost their mothers and we had to feed them in the night.

the story begins in the year of eighteen hundred and thirty. the years are of the lord.

the day it started was not a warm day to begin. no it was a cold day to begin and the frost was on every blade of grass. but then later the sun did come up and the frost went and then the birds were all starting up. and it was like the sun was in my legs for i got the feeling that i get. it goes in to my legs and then goes up in to my head.

the sap was rising up through the stems. and the leaves were unfurling. and the birds were putting a lining in their nests.

and the world was put in mind of spring.

i remember where i was that day for i was letting the hens out for they had been inside all morning for to lay their eggs and now they were to be let out for to run and eat worms and insects what would make the eggs taste and they was to eat some grass which was starting to grow after the winter that was so cold.

i opened the door of the house where the hens lived and the cock came out first and he was marching to music though there was none.

the hens stood in the doorway looking at the day and i did chase them out in to the home field and that is when i heard my sister beatrice calling out to me. she was stopped at the gate in to the home field and she was saying my name.

mary, she said. what you doing?

whatsit look like i'm doing? i asked.

looks like you been letting the hens out, she said.

really? i said. that's strange cos i ain't been doing that. i been dancing with the cockerel and then we had a feast together and the pig came and he sat on the top chair and he sang us all a song.

you don't get no better, she said.

how can i get better? i asked. if i ain't exactly ill.

you wanna do less talking and more working, she said.

and you wanna do less watching what everyone else is doing, i said, and do more of the doing yourself. so where is it you been?

at the church.

well that ain't gonna get the animals fed, is it?

it might make god provide their food.

look at me, i said, i been hauling round this big tub of food. i ain't seeing god doing that.

he might not be dragging the food round, she said, but he grows it.

well bugger me, i said, and i thought it was me who planted all that seed.

you shouldn't speak like that.

speak how i like, i said.

you'll get in to trouble one day.

will i?

yes, she said. you will.

i put my hands on my hips. i been getting in to trouble all my life, i said, but it ain't never stopped me saying what i think.

i noticed, she said.

so where you been did you say?

i been to church, she said, cos i done some cleaning cos it gets dusty.

i know it gets dusty, i said. i ain't stupid.

she tipped her head to the side. o, ain't you, mary?

no, i said. i am not stupid. and before you say it i ain't slow. i ain't none of them things.

beatrice walked off to the house and i followed her and we went to the back door. only she didn't realize it but mother was standing right there with the pail full to the brim of milk in her hand. and she was looking at beatrice with a look what says what you doing in the house? get out to work.

and beatrice stood there with her mouth open then she said to mother all sweet like milk wouldn't curdle, mary said i should come in. she said you asked for me.

and then beatrice turned to me and give me one of they looks what says you better shut up.

mother stared at her, then she said, get out. go on.

and beatrice went.

so that left me and mother in the kitchen.

mother said to me, so you done the hens?

course i have, i said. you asked me to do them so i done them.

so how many eggs?

eggs? i said. eggs?

she stared at me.



now, no fly ain't never rested on mother since the year seventeen hundred and ninety two when she was a week old and a fly come in the room and rested on her crib. but even then she was as quick as a river and she swatted that fly off her and from that day on they knew not to come near her.

yeh, eggs, she said. how many were there?

i lost count, i said.

lost count? how?

how? i said.

yes. how.

ah, i said, i know what happened.

she looked right at me. and waited.

i reckon, i said, i was so busy counting my steps coming back here it made me clean forget i was sposed to be carrying the eggs.

if you got time to count steps, she said, then you ain't got enough jobs and you'll be looking for more, won't you?

i nodded.

or your father'll have summat to say to you. and he'll have summat to say to me. so you better go get them.

and so i went back in to the hen house and i put the eggs in the basket. some was still warm and some had shit and feathers on them.

and one was under a hen and i pushed her off it.

i counted them all. twenty and that is not lucky for the eggs should always be odd so i put the one back under the hen and it was nineteen. i told them for to lay more tomorrow or they would be in the pot.

mother was standing by the table. and she had a mixing bowl clutched to her like as if she was stopping it from jumping right out of her hand and down on to the flagstones.

i put the basket of eggs on the side and went to go next door.

where you reckon you're going? she asked.

in to see grandfather.

don't you reckon you're staying in there all day. you wanna be doing less talking and more working.

i know, i said.

and i do know. but i can't help it. cos i am how i am. my tongue goes fast as the cat's tongue when he laps up the milk from the bucket.

i went on in the other room and there he was sat by the fire. there wasn't no flames. i sat in the other chair face to face with him and my grandfather looked at me and he smiled.

what you been doing? i asked.

this and that, he said, and some more of that.

i moved my chair closer in to him. did violet wash you?

o yeh, he said. she washed me all right. bloody scrubbed at me skin till it was nearly all rubbed off. she reckons i'm a cow she's getting ready for the market. mind, don't reckon they'd get a lot for me. not a lot of meat on me, is there?

i laughed and pulled straight the coat which was over his legs to keep them warm cos they were dead where he fell off the hayrick.

how many eggs today then, young miss? he asked.

not enough.

bugger. they'll be for it.

i'll be for it.

take them out some scraps. feed them up a bit. get a bit of fat on them. that'll get them laying.

pig has the scraps.

steal some from the pig.

i nodded. i will, but he's a greedy bugger.

grandfather wagged his finger. none of that language from a young'n like you, he said. mind, you speak right, he is a greedy bugger.

i laughed. so, i said, what you gonna do now?

not a lot *to* do. i'll have my dinner when it's ready. i'll have a bit of old shut eye after that. then i'll shuffle through and peel some taters, eat summat at the table with you lot, and then get on to bed and find meself another day nearer death.

don't say that.

why the bloody hell not? he asked. roll on death the working man's friend.

don't say that neither.

that what you come for, tell me what i can and can't say?

no, i said. come in to see you was all right. if you need anything.

all i need's two new legs.

o, i said.

yeh, o.

he looked at the empty fireplace then back at me. look at us, he said, what a bloody pair we are. four legs between us, and only one's any good.

we laughed and i stood up.

where you going? he asked.

she said i wasn't to talk all day. spec there's some jobs for me to do.

bugger the jobs. get your cheeks back on the chair.

so i sat down. you seen beatrice? i asked.

grandfather yawned. she's been in here, he said, boring me nearer to my maker than i was. praying for my soul she was, so loud she near made me deaf. what does she reckon? if she asks her god loud enough to heal me, i'll be jumping up from

the chair and dancing? gonna need more than a miracle for that.

and he laughed. then his eyes started cos he laughed so much and he got out his thick red and white hanky and wiped.

you sisters, he said. couldn't get more different if you covered every woman in the parish, had a daughter out of each one.

but i'm your favourite, ain't i? i asked.

he stared at me, then smiled and nodded. course you are. but don't you tell one of they buggers i said so.

then we heard mother's voice outside the door. she still in there talking? she asked.

i stood up. i ain't waiting for her to come and thicken up my ear, i said.

i tucked the coat back round his legs and opened the window. i climbed clean out and jumped down in to the home field. shut the window behind me.

i went on round the home field towards the hen house and the other gate and i had a stick in my hand and i was hitting at the dead thistles and spraying their seed in the air.

what you doing?

i looked up and saw father standing at the gate.

look at you, he said, flouncing round like you ain't got nothing better to do.

i ain't flouncing, i said. i was only wanting to know where violet was.

she's where she ought to be, in the three acre. where you ought to be.

all right, i said. i'm going there.

then get on with it. ain't like you're special. just cos of that.

he pointed at my leg.

i didn't say i was special, i said.

i went on through the home field and past the hens and over the gate and up the lane towards the three acre.

i didn't say i was special.

and i never have said that.

and i never even thought that.

my leg is my leg and i ain't never known another leg. it's the way i always been and the way i always walked. mother says it was like that when i come out in to the world. i was some scrap of a thing with hair like milk and i was born later than they thought and for that reason i was covered in some hair like i was an animal and my nails was long. and she says i took one look around me and i opened my mouth and i yelled and some say i ain't never shut it since.

and some say mother was sick that summer and she was still working in the fields and she had this lump which was me and she couldn't very well bend down cos i was in the way.

and they say that my leg was twisted round underneath me and it ain't never been right since.

when i was a baby they tied it to some piece of wood to straighten it only it rubbed and there was blood and i screamed till they took it off and let my leg go in the way it wanted to.

and so that is the way i am.