

THE ASS AND THE HEN

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Dedicated to Aesop, George Orwell and Alexia Ruby Falk

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Every great story must illustrate a universal theme but have a unique twist.

Neither the ass nor the hen was aware that they lived on a very modest farm. The farmer used the ass for plowing, harvesting, pulling the carriage, and a variety of other hard labors. The hen had a much softer life. She was a prize winning egg layer. Her eggs were known far and wide for their size and quality. Every day she was sure to lay one of these eggs and the farmer always seemed to give her a smile, and sometimes even poked her breast gently and lovingly.

The hen was not very nice. She was always provoking and taunting the ass. "It is difficult for me to live with someone as crude and crass as you," she constantly told the ass. "But you have the life you deserve and I have the life I deserve. While the master snubs you he is very loving to me. Just look at the difference between what he feeds you and what he feeds me. Your diet is full of thistles and thorns while I eat the finest corn."

This was partly true. The field was plagued by bull thistles and this vile weed comprised the bulk of the ass's diet. But the hen did not realize that she was fed inferior animal feed corn that the farmer grew around the perimeter of his field to discourage thieves.

The ass came to feel that the hen was right. "I do all the heavy work and he clearly dislikes me but he likes you even though you do nothing."

"Not so quick, Dense Head, I do the creative work around here. Can you lay eggs? You are just a brute so the master justly treats you as a brute. He can't stand your raucous braying - no one can - while he clearly likes my gentle cooing."

One day, the hen simply stopped laying eggs. It depressed her at first, but the farmer did not show any anger. In fact, he spoke gently to her, continued to poke her lovingly on the breast and feed her as well as before.

Plowing time came and the ass knew he was in for tough days. From dawn to dusk he strained at the plow tearing it through the clotted clay soil. Exhausted in the evening, when he was led back to his stall in the barn the farmer went to fetch his

daily meal of thistles. There was a never ending supply of that harsh fare even though the dried thistle bulbs tasted like a delicacy after such hard days.

All this time, the farmer lavished ever more loving attention on the hen. She found that the corn had a new divine sweetness and that the farmer had increased the size of her portion. The ass smacked his thick lips at seeing and smelling the delicious corn and begged the hen for a taste. "You really don't need all of that. It would give me such pleasure to have just a few of the extra kernels."

But the hen, who had previously been something of a careless eater suddenly became an extremely fastidious eater, covetous of every kernel, and out of a combination of spite and jealousy, made sure not to drop a single kernel, but gorged herself on more than she had ever eaten before to make doubly sure that the ass got nothing of her fare.

Through all the days of the plowing, the hen became intolerable to the exhausted ass, lording it over him ceaselessly. "Now the master has increased not only the size but the quality of my repast. It just shows how loved and honored I am for all my wonderful years of superlative egg laying. You were born a brute, you remain a brute and you will always be a brute, so your life will continue to be one of the travail that you deserve at the same time that I have grown even more beautiful and beloved than ever."

On the last day of the plowing, both ass and farmer returned to the barn exhausted and bathed in sweat but happy that the year's most difficult work was over. The farmer gently and lovingly poked the hen's breast as had become his habit but for the first time he went over and patted the ass, as if for a job well done. The hen was so astonished that she was speechless while the ass felt a pride he had never known before. "I am appreciated at last," he said to himself.

The farmer then went out to get the animals' feed. He quickly returned with the customary bale of thistles for the ass and the hen's large portion of sweet corn.

The farmer threw down the bale of thistles for the ass and then opened the bag of corn for the hen. Suddenly he chuckled to himself. "Oh me, aren't we all slaves to habit." Looking at the corn for a moment he poured it on top of the pile of thistles. "Well, well, as they say, waste not, want not."

Then the farmer lovingly picked up the hen and, with a unique twist, snapped her neck and carried her out of the barn for his family's feast.