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THE GREAT EGG MYSTERY

One day was pretty much the same as any other on Geengrove farm; at least it was for the chickens. They would spend the night sleeping on their perches in the chicken-house, and in the morning they would hop down and sit in the straw of their nesting boxes until they had laid their eggs. Once they had done this it was cause for great happiness. Topsy climbed out of the box, looked at her newly-laid egg and wanted the world to know about it; so she started cackling and squawking at the top of her voice: "I've laid an egg! I've laid an egg!"

Whisky was next off her box and she did the same: "Me too - I've laid an egg! I've laid an egg!"

Before long nearly all of the hens were calling out and the chicken-house was filled with the noise of cackling hens.

After a while, they figured there wasn't much point in carrying on because, by now, everyone knew what they had done; so they went quiet and waited for the best part of the day. This was the time when one of the humans came and opened the chicken-house door. As soon as that happened, the hens would rush out into the yard. There they would wait for the human to dip a hand into a bucket and start tossing food around. "Hey, we've got wheat today," said Whisky, "I love wheat."

"Yes," Topsy agreed, "It's a lot easier to eat than that other hard stuff."

"Better get as much as we can before Prudence comes," said Whisky, "You know how greedy she is."

"And lately," added Topsy, "She's been very cranky. To be truthful, I'm glad she's still inside."

It didn't take long for the chickens to finish off all the wheat. Then they just wandered around the yard, scratching in the dirt for bugs and insects. Topsy and Whisky usually stayed together because they liked each other's company, and they were always chatting. "I've been thinking about eggs," said Topsy.

"What about them?" Whisky asked.

"Well," began her friend, then paused not quite knowing what to say that would make any sense. Finally she said: "I mean, we lay one in the morning, and when we go back into the chicken-house at night it's gone as if by magic."

Whisky chuckled. "It has nothing to do with magic. I've seen the human children go into the chicken-house, then come out with our eggs in their hands."

"Oh." Topsy sounded disappointed. "Not magic, then."

"No," said Whisky, "Probably the only magic is us laying them in the first place."

"That's another thing," said Topsy, "Why do we do that - lay eggs, I mean? What are they for?"

Whisky thought about it for a moment, then replied: "The humans must want them for something because they keep taking them."

"Hmm," mumbled Topsy, "I hope you're right, otherwise laying eggs seems rather a waste of effort."

The sun began to set, and as it did the brightness in the yard first started turning yellow, then orange. For the hens, this was a sign that the day was almost over and it was time to go to bed. They all returned to the chicken-house and flew up onto their perches. Whisky and Topsy were the last in. "I see Prudence is still sitting in her box," said Whisky.

"I didn't notice her outside at all today," said Topsy, "She must have been in here all day. Do you think she's okay?"

Whisky thought about that. "Maybe we should ask her."

"Oh, I'm not sure that's such a good idea," Topsy said warily, "She's been so bad-tempered lately she'll probably growl at us."

"Well, I'm going anyway," said Whisky heading off towards Prudence's nesting-box, "She could be sick or something. She may be a grouch, but we can't just not care." She walked over and stood in front of Prudence. "Are you alright, Prudence. You didn't come out today. Weren't you hungry?"

"In answer to your stupid questions," grumbled Prudence, "Yes I am, no I didn't, and no I'm not! Anyway, as you can see if you bother to look, I have a bowl of food and a bowl of water right in front of my box."

"Ooh," said Topsy, "So you have. Where did you get those from?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Prudence answered grumpily, "But one of the human children brought them for me."

The other two hens fell silent as they thought about this. Eventually, Whisky asked: "Why would they do that for you and not for us?"

"Because," growled Prudence, "You can go outside for your food and water, but I can't."

"I don't understand," said Topsy, "If you're alright as you say you are, why can't you go outside to eat and drink like the rest of us?"

Prudence groaned. "Isn't it obvious? I have to stay inside because I'm busy. Now..." she paused to shuffle around in the box to make herself comfortable. "Will you two go to bed? You are starting to annoy me." With that, Prudence closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Things carried on much the same for a while, with the hens laying eggs and the human children taking them away; and Prudence never left the chicken-house. The two friends would go over to say goodnight, but that was all. They would have liked to know what she was so busy at when all she ever did was sit on the nesting-box; but knowing that Prudence would snap at them if they asked, they said no more. Then, one morning something happened to change the cranky hen. "Hey," Prudence called out as Whisky and Topsy were leaving the chicken-house, "Come here. I've got something to show you."

Whisky and Topsy wandered over to Prudence's nesting box. Neither could imagine what Prudence could show them that would be of any interest when she'd just sat in her box for ages doing absolutely nothing. They stood by the box waiting. Prudence shuffled around a bit, then

carefully climbed out of the box. The other hens still waited. "Well," said Prudence, "What do you think?"

Whisky blinked a few times. "What do we think about what?"

"Dear, oh dear," moaned Prudence, "Look in the box, why don't you?"

They did. In moments both Whisky and Topsy were staring wide-eyed at lots of eggs resting on the straw. "How come the humans didn't take YOUR eggs?" asked Topsy, sounding a little hurt.

"Wait a bit and you'll see," said Prudence, quite proudly and surprisingly cheerfully. "There," she clucked, touching one of the eggs with her beak, "See - the shell is starting to break."

"Why is it doing that?" asked Whisky, "Did you tap it with your beak?"

"I didn't need to," explained Prudence, "The beak inside the egg did the breaking."

Topsy was puzzled. "There's a beak inside the egg? Why would there be a beak inside an egg? Is that why the humans want them - because they haven't got beaks of their own?"

"No, silly," said Prudence. "There's much more than just a beak - the beak is only part of a little chick."

"What's a chick?" asked Topsy, still confused.

That is," said Prudence. As they were watching, a tiny baby chicken pushed itself out of the broken egg-shell and lay on the straw. "That's my chick, my baby; and in a few minutes there'll be seven more."

"Aaah, now I see," said Whisky, "That's what eggs are for - to make baby chickens."

"And if you want to have your own chicks," said Prudence, "Just do what I did - stay sitting on the eggs you lay and the humans will bring you food and water until the eggs are ready to hatch out."

Three weeks later, Whisky and Topsy were sitting side by side in their nesting-boxes, keeping their eggs warm, looking forward to the day when they would hatch. Then, like Prudence, they would have their own babies. "Isn't it exciting," said Topsy, "I'm really glad Prudence told us what eggs are for."

"So am I," said Whisky. "There is one thing I've been wondering about, though."

"What's that, Whisky?"

"The humans," explained Whisky, "They've been taking our eggs for so long that, by now, they must have their own house full of chickens. How come we haven't seen any of them?"

The two chickens puzzled over the problem for some time, but couldn't find an answer. "Oh, well," said Topsy eventually, "I guess that's one thing that will have to remain a complete mystery."