DAYS WITHOUT AN INCIDENT

"F is still open."

"If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

George Orwell
The Freedom of the Press, his proposed preface to *Animal Farm*, 1945

The farm, the animals and everything that happens to them are invented.
The pattern is not.

I

The Hollow

In later years, the guides at Hollow Farm began every tour at a painted board beside the main gate and ended it with a glance down into the Hollow, where by then there was very little to see. In the autumn this story begins, the Hollow was the liveliest place on the farm.

It was a wide, shallow bowl at the bottom of the farm, below the Row. The Row was a line of stalls where the older animals lived in their last years before leaving, and a few of the stalls at its far end looked straight down into the bowl. Every week that autumn, on the last two nights, the animals who lived in three of those stalls opened their doors and lit a fire in the middle of the Hollow, and whoever wanted to come was invited.

That was all there was to it. The fire required no petition, and a formal invitation was not necessary. It had been lit on those two nights for longer than any animal on the farm could remember.

The three stalls drew three different crowds. One of them sang the same twenty songs every week, badly, and knew all the words to perhaps eleven. Another was always the most crowded, and by midnight a third of the farm seemed to be standing in or around its doorway. The third played music from somewhere far to the south, and animals who wandered over to watch the dancing on a cold night in autumn could often do the steps by spring. Every door stood open to every animal, and most animals passed through all three before the night was over. The crowds were different. What had brought them down the hill was the same.

A horse named Hob lived in one of the three stalls that year. He was large and loud and would give anyone the coat off his back, and he believed that most of the trouble in the world came from animals not explaining themselves clearly enough.

The Hollow was not organized, but things were noticed. One night that autumn a young goose sat down in the frozen grass by the lower fence and could not get up again. Two strangers walked her to her own stall at the far end of the farm. It took them most of an hour, and they missed the end of the night. Neither of them mentioned it afterward. Something of the kind happened most weeks, to someone.

At the end of each night, when the fire was low, the animals who were left stood in a ring around it, pressed shoulder to shoulder with whoever happened to be beside them, and sang the Cold-Weather Song. Then they went home.

* * *

Gatherings at the Lodges were a different matter.

The Lodges stood along the upper lane, and each belonged to one of the farm's flocks. A Lodge that wished to hold a gathering had to petition the farmhouse one full moon in advance, send written notice to every house on the lane, and pay out of its own stores for a farm dog to stand at its door all evening. At least three of its own members had to have attended two evenings of instruction at the farmhouse. On the night, these watchers wore yellow bands on their forelegs, kept well back from the fire, and signed a paper when the gathering began and another when it ended.

All of this had been the rule for years, and the Lodges were used to it. What was new was that the petitions came back refused more often. Of thirty-one petitions submitted that autumn, nineteen were refused, mostly for insufficient notice, although notice had always been one moon and was still one moon. After the gatherings that were allowed, letters arrived about things noticed afterward. A cup had been left on the lawn. A song had been heard as far as the lane.

A goat named Tarrant had worn the yellow band at his Lodge's gatherings more often than any animal living. He had signed his name on a hundred and forty papers. When a younger watcher asked him once what the papers were for, Tarrant said, "So that afterward they know whose name to read out." The younger watcher laughed. Tarrant did not.

* * *

The farmhouse stood on the rise above the Lodges, and its business was done at a long table. The business of the farm's evenings belonged to a pig named Mr. Hale.

The animals knew Mr. Hale mostly by his signature, which was round and careful and appeared at the bottom of every letter about their evenings. Like several of the older pigs at the long table, he had sat at the fire in the Hollow when he was young, and he mentioned it often.

He kept a copy of every letter he had ever signed, filed by date, in a cabinet beside his desk. In thirty-one years, not one of them had been the subject of a complaint.

Beyond the lower fence ran the lane, and along the lane the farmers had built houses, each a little nearer the Hollow than the last. The newest was finished that sum-

mer. Its owner had moved out from the city, he told his neighbors, for the quiet.

In the third week of autumn, at a little after one in the morning, a lamp came on in his window.

II

The Hour That Struck Twice

The farmer from the new house came out to the lower fence in his nightshirt and stood there for some minutes. In the morning, a complaint reached the farmhouse.

The dogs came down the following week. There were four of them, led by a heavy, patient dog named Corder, who had held the post for nine years and was liked by most animals on the farm. The first time, he asked the three stalls to bring their singing down, and they did. Shortly after one o'clock the lamp in the new house came on again. Corder came back and told the animals to put out the fire and go home.

He explained, when Hob asked him, that the animals kept their stalls on the Row under an agreement with the farmhouse, and that under the agreement a complaint from beyond the fence meant a fire could be ended at once. Hob had signed the agreement two months before. He had not read that part. Corder said he was not the first.

Ten days later came the longest night of the autumn, the night the great clock in the barn is turned back an hour for winter and two o'clock comes around twice.

By long custom, the fire in the Hollow was banked at two in the morning. That night the barn clock struck two, and Hob's stall kept the fire going, because by every other clock on the farm it was one. An hour later the barn clock struck two again. They banked the fire, sang the Cold-Weather Song, and went to bed.

The letter came to Hob's stall three days later. It stated that its residents had kept their fire burning past "the first two o'clock." It invited them to arrange a meeting between the sixteenth and twentieth days of the next moon and advised that the matter remained under review. Hob read it aloud to his stallmates twice, and then a third time, slowly, as though the meaning might change if he read it more carefully.

Within the month, letters came to all three stalls. Each one said that until the spring planting the stall could receive no more than ten guests, and that its singing had to stay inside its own walls. Each one also said, in a separate paragraph, that if another complaint was made, every resident of the stall would be held responsible, whoever had been making the noise, and that some might be asked to leave the farm. Each letter asked that its contents be kept private.

Behind the feed shed there was a stretch of boards where animals scratched what they would not say aloud. Within a day of the letters, someone had scratched *A hundred bushels a year and no fire*, and within a week the boards around it were so covered in marks of agreement that the words were hard to read. The boards said the Hollow had been closed. The letters had not said that. But the letters were private, and the boards were not.

Mr. Hale replied the following Sunday, in a statement Corder read out at the assembly.

He wished, he wrote, to correct a misunderstanding. There were no restrictions on the Hollow, and there never had been. The Hollow remained open to every animal on the farm, to be used as it always had been, in keeping with the farm's existing rules. A single stall on the Row was at present under a limit on guests: ten, rather than the twenty the agreement ordinarily allowed. In every such case, he added, the farmhouse considered the circumstances carefully and gave the animals a chance to be heard. He closed by mentioning that he had sat at the Hollow's fire as a young pig, and that he valued it as much as any animal on the farm.

The three stalls each had a letter. Mr. Hale said there was one. Each letter had asked to be kept private, so each stall had only the others' word, and they did not compare.

It was true that the Hollow was open. Any animal could walk down into it. With the three stalls shut, it was a frozen bowl of ground with a ring of old ash in the middle. Winter arrived that same week, three weeks earlier than usual, and the ground stayed hard until March.

* * *

Hob wrote letters.

He wrote first to Corder, who told him kindly that it was out of his paws. He wrote next to the office that handled the farm's evenings, then a second time to the same office, and then to Mr. Hale. He numbered every letter and kept a copy of each in a box under his straw. They were good letters, clear and fair. He explained the business of the clock with diagrams. He believed the farmhouse had made an honest mistake about the time and would put it right once it understood.

The answer to the fourth letter arrived nine days later. The limit on the stalls, it said, had been clarified: it would end at the turn of the year rather than at the spring planting. That was a little more than a month away.

Hob was overjoyed. He wrote a fifth letter, of thanks, and told everyone on the Row that it showed what could be done if you explained yourself clearly. Several animals from the other two stalls came by to shake his hoof.

He told Tarrant too, when they passed on the upper lane. Tarrant listened to the whole story without interrupting.

"Did they say you'd done anything wrong?" he asked at the end.

Hob thought about it. "Well, no. They didn't say either way."

"Then they never will," said Tarrant. "You wrote to ask whether it was fair. They wrote back to tell you how long. Those are two different questions, and you've just thanked them for answering the easier one."

Hob laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, and went on down the lane in high spirits. It was some years before he understood what Tarrant had meant.

* * *

That winter Mr. Hale began a ledger. It was bound in green cloth. On the first page, under the heading *Incidents on Farm Ground*, he entered the date of the lamp and the date of the hour that struck twice. He had a dog go down and copy out the words from behind the feed shed, and he read them in his study several times. Then he wrote a second statement, much like the first, and in it he mentioned twice that he had sat at the fire as a young pig.

The limit ended at the turn of the year, as promised.

That night the six animals of Hob's stall sat around their table and voted on whether to open their doors to the Hollow again on fire nights. Hob argued for nearly an hour. They had done nothing wrong, he said, and the farmhouse itself had said the Hollow was open. A young bull named Pell, who said very little as a rule, pointed out that if the lamp came on again, all six of them would answer for it, and he could not afford to be sent home. He had two sisters coming to the farm in the autumn.

Five of them voted to keep the doors shut. Hob alone voted to open them. Then Hob, who did not like to stand apart from his friends, asked to change his vote so that they would all be agreed. The doors stayed shut, six to none.

The other two stalls voted the same week. Both kept their doors shut as well.

III

More Variety

The Outpost stood beside the main path, a little below the big barn, and every animal on the farm passed it several times a day.

It was a long, low room with wide windows, kept for ten years by an old badger who rented it from the farmhouse. In the early mornings animals came in to work at its tables before the day started. In the afternoons they came to rest their legs and talk. On weekends they came for no reason at all. A great many of them did not care for fires or crowds and had no interest in the Hollow. The Outpost was the one room on the farm where all of them could be found, at one hour or another.

In one corner the badger kept a small iron stove. In the evenings, animals past their third year could warm themselves at it. It was the only flame on the farm that burned under the farm's own roof, and in ten years it had never hurt anyone.

In the spring a notice went up beside the Outpost door. The farmhouse would not be renewing the Outpost's lease. In response to the animals' own expressed wish for greater variety in their feed, the room would be refitted as a new feed counter, to open in the autumn. A survey conducted the previous year, the notice explained, had found that sixty-one percent of animals wanted more variety.

Several animals could not remember being asked. Those who did remembered the question as: *Would you like more variety in your feed?* Tarrant had answered yes. He said afterward that he was sorry, and that he would be more careful in future about what he agreed to.

The notice did not mention the stove. The plans for the new feed counter, pinned up beside it, showed the room in some detail. Where the stove had been, they showed a cabinet.

On the badger's last afternoon, the animals who had worked at the Outpost tables for years stood outside and watched him lock the door. Then they went off and found other places to work. The other places were smaller and colder and spread about the farm, so that animals who had once seen each other every morning now saw each other now and then.

Around the same time, in the room in the big barn where the farm held its Thursday evenings, a small hatch at the back was boarded over. The older animals used to

be able to get something warm there. There was no announcement, and few animals noticed.

* * *

That spring, at the suggestion of a younger pig at the long table, a painted board was put up at the main gate. Across the top it said DAYS WITHOUT AN INCIDENT ON FARM GROUND, and below that was a number. A dog changed the number every morning. Underneath, in smaller letters, the board noted that ninety-six percent of the farm's animals lived on farm ground. The farmhouse was proud of that figure as well, and kept it high. An animal who wished to take a room in the lane needed the farmhouse's permission, which was seldom given.

The board stood where every visitor would see it. On visiting days, when the parents of the next year's first-years were shown around the farm, the guides were instructed to stop beside it. Mr. Hale approved the board himself and was pleased by how well it was received. One mother said it was the first thing she had seen anywhere that made her feel her son would be all right.

The number reached one hundred in early summer. Mr. Hale entered it in the green ledger, which he now read every night before sleep, a few pages at a time, the way some animals read scripture.

The Lodges submitted twenty-six petitions that spring. Eighteen were refused. Tarrant signed his name on fewer papers than in any year since he had first put on the yellow band.

* * *

Hob left the farm at the end of the spring with the rest of his class, as every class eventually does, and Tarrant left with him. On his last night Hob walked down into the Hollow alone and stood for some time beside the ring of cold ash. Then he went back up to his stall and slept.

He left his box of letters under the straw. The animal who moved into his place that autumn found it in September and did not know what it was. He used the letters, a few at a time, to start the small fire he had begun keeping in the stall, with the door shut and a blanket over the window, for himself and two or three friends.

The new residents of the three stalls had all heard about the letters of the year before, and about the paragraph that said every resident would answer. They kept their doors shut.

That year, for the first time in the memory of the farm, the fire in the Hollow was not lit at all.

IV

Who Are You With?

A lamb named Dulcie arrived on the farm that autumn from a small place in the hills, where she had been the only lamb of her year. She was quick and willing and badly wanted to be liked. She had a habit, which she did not know she had, of agreeing with whoever had spoken last.

She had heard about the Hollow from an older cousin, who had been on the farm years before. On her second weekend she walked down to it after dark and found a bowl of frozen ground and not a single animal in it. She stood there for a while in case she had come too early.

There were fires on the farm that year, more of them than there had ever been, but they were behind doors. They burned in stalls with blankets over the windows, and in the back rooms of Lodges that had stopped bothering to petition, and in the woods beyond the upper fence, where the farm's land ended. Each of them had its own animals. A newcomer could get in if someone brought her.

Dulcie knocked on a number of doors that autumn. They were opened politely, usually by animals about her own age, and each time she was asked the same question.

"Who are you with?"

"Nobody, really," said Dulcie. "I just heard there was something on."

The animals at the door would look at each other, and one of them would say that it was a small thing tonight, really just a few friends, and perhaps another time. Then the door would close. It was always done kindly. Inside, she could hear them laughing, and once, very faintly, a few of them singing what she was fairly sure was the Cold-Weather Song.

She wrote home every week that she had made a great many friends.

By the time the snow came, the number on the board at the main gate stood at three hundred and twelve.

* * *

In the last week of winter, on the coldest night of the year, Dulcie heard two hens in the feed line talking about a fire that would be in the woods past the upper fence. She had not been invited. She went anyway, alone, after dark.

There were about twenty animals in the clearing, most of whom seemed to know each other. For once, she was not asked who she was with. She was so pleased about this that she stayed much longer than she meant to. It was bitterly cold, and the fire was small, and she kept edging nearer to it.

Some time after midnight the fire began to die, and one of the animals threw something onto it from a jar to make it catch again. It went up all at once, higher than anyone expected. Dulcie was standing closest. The flame took her along her left side and the side of her face.

What happened next took only a few minutes, and each of the animals there later told it a little differently.

Pell was among them, the young bull from Hob's old stall who had voted to keep its doors shut. He was in his last year now. He said, in a low voice, that whoever carried her to the farmhouse would have to answer for the fire, and probably everyone in the clearing would too, and they would all be sent home. A young heifer named Moll said that she did not care. Moll was one of the two sisters Pell had been thinking of when he voted. She was in her first year, and she had come to the woods that night because her brother had brought her.

Another animal pointed out that none of them even knew the lamb's name.

In the end they carried her as far as the upper fence and laid her on the farm side of it, where the morning dog would pass. All of them left except Moll, who sat beside her in the snow and talked to her. When she heard the dog coming along the fence an hour before dawn, she ran.

* * *

It was Corder who found her. The farmer in the new house had seen the glow from his window and sent word to the farmhouse, and Corder had come up the fence line to look.

The long table met that morning. The first question asked was where it had happened, and it was established that it had happened past the upper fence.

Mr. Hale opened the green ledger. He wrote Dulcie's name in his careful hand, and beside it: *Not on farm ground.*

The next morning, the dog at the main gate changed the number on the board, as he did every morning. It went up by one.

Mr. Hale was badly shaken, and those who worked closely with him that week said so afterward. He did not go to the infirmary. He wrote Dulcie a letter instead, telling her that the farmhouse would pay the whole cost of her care, that he was thinking of her, and that she should want for nothing. Every word of it was sincere. He signed it in his round, careful hand.

On Sunday he issued a statement to the whole farm. It expressed his deep concern. It reminded the animals that the incident had taken place beyond the farm's boundary. It announced a new rule that animals were not to gather in the woods past the upper fence, for the safety of every animal. It was the first statement he had issued in thirty-two years that did not mention the fire he had sat at as a young pig.

Dulcie kept the letter under her pillow in the infirmary and showed it to every nurse who came in. The animals from the clearing stayed away, and she did not learn their names. She did not remember Moll, or the talking, or the snow.

She wrote home that she had had an accident, and that the farmhouse had been so kind.

V

Visiting Day

Four springs after the hour that struck twice, there was no longer an animal on the farm who had stood in the Hollow on a fire night.

In the meantime the new feed counter had opened where the Outpost had been, and it offered nine kinds of feed instead of four. The Lodges had submitted forty-four petitions that year, and three had been granted. The fires behind doors went on as before, in greater numbers each year. The farmhouse did not know about them, so they did not appear in the green ledger.

Dulcie had become a guide.

The farmhouse had offered her the post in her second year, with a small allowance of extra feed, and she had accepted at once. She was very good at it. She remembered every figure, and she believed every word she said. She was in her last year now, and she had shown more visitors around the farm than any other guide.

On visiting day that spring she led a group of eleven: parents of the following year's first-years, mostly, along with a few of the first-years themselves, who hung back and looked at everything.

She began, as the guides always did, at the main gate.

"This is our board," she said. "Every morning a dog changes the number. It's how many days in a row there hasn't been an incident on farm ground." The number that morning was one thousand and ninety-one. "And almost all of us live on the farm, all four years. The farm-

house likes to keep us close." A mother hen asked whether the big number had ever gone back to nothing, and Dulcie said that in all her time on the farm, it never had. This was true.

She showed them the feed counter, and told them it had been built because the animals themselves had asked for more variety. She showed them the Lodges along the upper lane, and told them that every gathering held there had a dog at the door and trained watchers in yellow bands. She did not mention how few gatherings were held. It was not in the guides' notes, and it had not occurred to her.

At the end of the Row she stopped and pointed down into the bowl below. It was green now, and very tidy.

"That's the Hollow," she said. "It's open to all animals."

"What goes on down there?" asked one of the fathers, a big, earnest ox.

Dulcie thought about it honestly. "Nothing, really," she said. "It's very quiet."

The ox nodded, satisfied. One of the first-years went on looking down into the bowl for a moment after the others had turned away.

As the group started back toward the farmhouse, a heifer in her last year came along the Row and saw them. It was Moll. She knew Dulcie at once, and Dulcie looked straight at her and did not know her at all. Moll stood still on the path until the group had gone by. Then she went the other way.

It was the mother hen who noticed the mark. The light had shifted, and the white line on the left side of Dulcie's face, running from her ear down to her jaw, showed clearly.

"Oh, my dear," said the hen gently. "What happened there?"

Dulcie smiled the way she had learned to smile on these tours.

"Oh, that," she said. "That happened past the fence." And she turned and led them back up the path toward the board at the gate.

The hen said she was sorry to hear it, and let it go. The visitors looked from the mark on the lamb's face to the number on the board, and from the number back to the mark, and they believed the number.

* * *

That evening Mr. Hale sat in his study and entered the day's figure in the green ledger. It had been, by every account, a very successful visiting day.

In thirty-five years, nothing that had happened to an animal on Hollow Farm had ever been his fault. Somewhere along the way, he had come to believe that this was the same as nothing having happened to them.