

Animal Farm: Chapter 4 - The Battle of the Cowshed

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Summary

By late summer, half of England has heard of the Rebellion on Animal Farm. Snowball and Napoleon send out pigeons to teach other animals "Beasts of England" and spread the news. Mr. Jones spends most of his time in the Red Lion in Willingdon, complaining about his situation to anyone who will listen. The neighbouring farmers, Mr. Pilkington of Foxwood and Mr. Frederick of Pinchfield, are frightened by what has happened but also hoping to turn it to their advantage. They hate each other too much to act together. Meanwhile, they spread contradictory rumours about Animal Farm: Frederick says the animals are dying of starvation and committing cannibalism; Pilkington says they practise a horrible immorality. Both continue to insist the farm should be called Manor Farm. Neither can stop "Beasts of England" from spreading to their own animals.

In October, pigeons bring news that Mr. Jones and men from Foxwood and Pinchfield are marching up the main road. Jones carries a gun. Snowball, who has been studying Julius Caesar's campaigns, has prepared a defence. The first wave of attack (pigeons and geese harrying the men) is merely a feint: the animals are lured forward into the farmyard, where the horses, cows, and pigs charge. Jones fires his gun, grazing Snowball's back. Snowball drives into Jones. Boxer strikes at a man with his hooves. The animals rout the attackers. The humans flee through the gate.

Boxer paws at a stable-lad from Foxwood lying in the mud, believing he has killed him. He is distressed. Snowball tells him that in war there is no room for squeamishness. The boy regains consciousness and escapes.

The animals discover Mollie hiding in her stall, terrified of the gunfire. The celebration begins: the flag, "Beasts of England" seven times, a burial for the one sheep who died in the attack. Snowball gives a speech on the willingness to die for Animal Farm. The animals create the honour of "Animal Hero, First Class," awarded to Snowball and Boxer for their conduct. The deceased sheep receives "Animal Hero, Second Class." The conflict is named the Battle of the Cowshed. They find Mr. Jones's gun and decide to fire it twice a year, on the anniversaries of the Rebellion and the Battle.

Analysis

The chapter provides what appears to be the revolution's clearest vindication: the animals, organised and led well, defend their farm against armed attackers. The victory is genuine. Snowball's tactical preparation and personal courage are on full display. This is the last chapter in which the revolution works more or less as promised.

But Orwell plants contradictions throughout. Snowball's reaction to Boxer's distress is troubling: "in war there is no room for squeamishness." Snowball is not wrong, exactly, but the ease with which he dismisses Boxer's genuine moral distress is a mark of the ideologue. He is more interested in the principle than in Boxer's feeling. This distinguishes him from the idealist of later Squealer-propaganda but also shows a quality that could, in different circumstances, produce its own cruelties.

Mollie's absence from the battle is consistent with everything the reader already knows about her: she participates when participation is comfortable and disappears when it costs something. More tellingly, her hiding place is her stall -- the most private, individual space on the farm.

The honours, the ceremonies, the named battle, the twice-yearly gun firing: all are the beginning of the institutional performance of revolutionary pride. They are presented positively here, but the reader will note that Napoleon inherits all of these ceremonial instruments and deploys them for his own purposes. The gun that commemorates the Battle of the Cowshed becomes the gun that fires on Napoleon's birthday.

Themes

- **Revolution and defence:** The Battle of the Cowshed represents the revolution's peak of genuine accomplishment: the animals defend what they have won through collective organisation and courage. Orwell does not undermine this achievement, but he places it in a chapter that also contains the first signs of the revolutionary pragmatism that will later become something worse.
- **Heroism and its appropriation:** Snowball and Boxer are both genuine heroes at the Battle of the Cowshed. Both have their roles in the battle later rewritten by Napoleon: Snowball will be said to have led the human side, and his medal will be declared a forgery. The authentic heroism of this chapter is the standard against which that rewriting registers.
- **Courage and its complexity:** Boxer's distress at believing he has killed the stable-lad is the chapter's most morally precise moment. He is a violent participant in a justified action who is also genuinely troubled by the violence. Snowball's dismissal of his distress is the first hint that principles can override persons.

- **Ceremony and the performance of loyalty:** The honours, the named battle, the commemorative gun firings establish a pattern of institutional ceremony. The revolution begins to perform itself -- to turn its achievements into recurring commemorations. This is the beginning of something that Napoleon will later weaponise.

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