

Anna and the Speckled Hen



This story is set in Germany during World War II. Food was scarce; people were malnourished and always hungry, especially children.

Anna was on her weekly trip to the country to try to get food. She had her bicycle, but she was too worn out to ride it, so she was walking along slowly, pushing it. Even that made her heart race. She was tired all the time these days.

She was discouraged, too. Not even the farmers seemed to have any vegetables left. Except for a few beets one man had given her, no one had had anything to give or sell her. Suddenly, Anna knew she could go no further. She would have to stop and rest. She laid her bicycle on its side, making sure the beets did not spill out of her basket. Then she lay down in the cool grass.

She dreamed of food. All her dreams were about food lately, it seemed. This time she dreamed of carrots the color of gold, steaming hot, in cream and butter. Even in her dream, though, she knew this was foolish, for she could not remember having had either butter or cream. But her mother had told her about them, and in her dream she could almost tell how wonderful they tasted.

Next in her dream there were tomatoes, beautiful red, juicy tomatoes. There was a great pile of them, and Anna was just about to eat one when they disappeared. With a start she woke up. She rolled over and sat up. And there, looking her right in the eye, was a speckled hen. They looked at each other - Anna and the hen.

Suddenly, Anna realized the hen was talking. At least she was clucking and making the kind of talk that speckled hens make.

"Why are you staring at me, you silly thing?" asked Anna. "And making all that noise that woke me up," she charged.

"Cu-u-u-t... cu-u-u-t..." said the hen, startled at Anna's cross-sounding voice, and she backed away.

It was then that Anna saw the egg! Carefully, she picked it up, still warm.

"Oh, you beautiful, beautiful hen!" she exclaimed. "I am sorry I was rude to

you. Thank you for this lovely egg!"

But the speckled hen had walked off, and Anna was left alone with the egg. She felt better now, more rested. She must hurry home so she could give the egg to her mother. Perhaps they could have a very small omelet!

Anna took off the scarf she wore on her head. Carefully, she wrapped the egg in it and laid it tenderly in the basket with the beets. Then she got on her bicycle and started up the road.

But an unhappy thought came to her. The egg wasn't really hers. It belonged to the owner of the speckled hen. Anna pedaling got slower and slower.

"No!" she told herself furiously, "the egg is mine. The hen laid it right beside me when I was asleep." Anna went on up the road. "Anyway, I don't know who owns the speckled hen. And even if I did, they would never know that I had the egg."

A little white house sat close to the road. "They can't tell a thing," argued Anna with herself. "I've got the egg all covered up." She began to pedal faster.

But her bicycle seemed to go more and more slowly. And when she got near the white house, her legs wouldn't pedal any longer. Very slowly, she got off her bicycle and walked up to the house.

"Yes?" asked the young woman who came to the door. Very reluctantly, with her dream of the small omelet fading fast, Anna said. "Do... do... you own a... a... speckled hen?"

"Why yes," said the young woman, "we do."

Carefully and very slowly, Anna unwrapped her scarf from around the egg and handed it to the woman.

"Then this is yours, too." she said in a small voice.

"Oh, thank you." said the woman. "That speckled hen is always wandering off and laying her eggs in the most unlikely places. She is the last of our hens, and we need her eggs for our little boy. He is very sick, you see."

Anna started to leave. The young woman looked troubled. "You have been so kind," she said. "I wish I had something to give you for your basket. But there is so little of everything. I... I... have nothing to give."

"It's all right," said Anna, and she climbed on her bicycle again. She was anxious now to get away from the little white house and the speckled hen and the wonderful egg.

When she got home, Anna told her mother what had happened. She was afraid her mother would scold her for being late, and for bringing home only a few beets. She might even be cross that Anna hadn't kept the egg.

But her mother only smoothed Anna's hair and looked at her for a long time, and smiled.

"Then you are not angry with me, Mother? You do not think I am too young to go to the country to bargain for vegetables?"

"No, Anna," said her mother, "I am just thinking what a fine daughter I have. When one is so hungry all the time, only a real grown-up could have made such a hard decision about the egg."

Ruth Hunt Gefvert

M. Clark; E. Briggs; C. Passmore (eds.)
Lighting Candles in the Dark
Philadelphia, FGC, 2001