



The Rooster

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THE FARMSTEAD lies just south of the road on the long east slope of the hill. The road comes over the low hill to the east, down through the flats and trees along the creek before it comes up below the corncrib, past the driveway and the cedar windbreak and up through the deep roadgrade over the hill to the west.

Sometimes for two weeks at a time in January, the Archer family is blocked in by the huge snow drifts that fill the road grade from the snow drifting before the northwest wind. But it's summer now, and those yellow clay banks are as hot and dusty as the road that lies between them. The long driveway starts at the road just above the corncrib and winds up the slope away from the road to the cool shade of the elms around the white frame house where it stands overlooking the farmstead below.

From the house you can see the haymow with its weathered wooden shingles where it stands on the lower slope about halfway to the creek . . . and there's the old horsebarn to the left near the corncrib. You can't see the hogshed from here because it's behind the barn, but you can see the hog pasture way down by the creek.

The air is hot and still in the August sun . . . the muffled sound of a tractor motor comes from somewhere in the fields to the south of the orchard . . . and a thunderhead in the blue-white sky. . . Here under the elms can be heard the cheerful sounds of clattering pots and pans in the house as Carol Archer prepares the noon meal. But where's Jimmy?

The redolent fragrance of ripening fruit comes from the orchard on the south summer breeze. The orchard . . . it's quiet here . . . only the sound of flies buzzing around the rotting apricots on the ground disturbs the silence in this small fenced-in plot of trees.

There's a big, tall cedar tree in one corner of the orchard. The ground is cool and moist beneath that tree . . . around its roots. And it's real easy to brush all the dead needles away and uncover the ground. Here's Jimmy; he's been playing under this tree all morning.

Jimmy is only eight years old this month; his birthday was last week, and he got a little toy tractor with wheels that really turn. The tires have lugs on them, just like his Daddy's big tractor, that make tracks in the soft earth.

Jimmy stood up to reach for the hoe that he had leaned against the fence. He looked down at the caked dirt on the knees of his baggy overalls and then tried to shake the dirt and moist clods out of the rolled cuffs of the pant legs that were too long for him. "Mommy will be mad at me," he thought as he turned back to his task of building his miniature farm. He had fields laid out and buildings of crate slats. . . . He had roads that ran everywhere under the tree right out to the edge where the tall weeds were that grew everywhere in the orchard except under the trees. He picked up a hacksaw blade that he had taken from his father's workshop and began sawing off the weeds, one at a time, at the end of a road. "I'll pretend I'm a lumberjack," he thought.

Jimmy likes it here . . . 'cause it's quiet and cool and he can play, with no one to bother him . . . nobody can see him from the house because of the weeds. Jimmy likes the fence around the orchard, too, because that means the rooster

can't get in. He's been playing here everyday since last Friday when that rooster chased him down by the haymow. "I wish I could play with the kittens in the haymow," thought Jimmy. "I wish I could play there . . . but its no fun when I have to watch for that rooster all the time," he murmured to himself.

John Archer looked up at the sun overhead. "Dinner should be about ready," he thought. He unhooked the hay-rake and headed down the lane past the orchard towards the house. "I'll bet Jimmy will be waiting at the orchard gate for a ride to the house," he mused. "He hasn't missed all week." And sure enough, the little boy appeared out of the growth of weeds at the orchard's edge as the tractor approached. A big white rooster strutted off the lane before the oncoming machine. Jimmy climbed over the fence, and his father lifted him up on the platform. "Jimmy, what are you doing in there that gets your overalls so dirty everyday?" He smiled inquiringly as he ruffled the boy's hair. Jimmy just shrugged and craned his neck to watch the rooster strut in a small semi-circle behind the tractor as they moved off toward the house.

Jimmy was still washing his face and hands in the tin pan on the stump in the front yard when Mr. Archer opened the screen door and stepped into the kitchen. "Say, honey, what's gotten into Jimmy? He's been in that orchard every day for the last week." Carol looked up from where she was putting the food on the table. "I've been wondering that same thing, John . . . I haven't seen him going into the barnyard, even to look at the baby pigs, for several days." She moved back to the stove. "He seems distracted, too . . . and he's always watching the chickens. . . ."

Jimmy marched into the kitchen and plunked himself on his chair at the table.

"Jimmy, how did you get your overalls so dirty?" asked his mother.

"Oh, I don't know. . . ." he replied as he reached to spear a potato with his fork. The meal passed with a background of grown-up talk. Jimmy finished quickly and hurried off again to the orchard.

And that night it rained. As Jimmy lay upstairs in bed

listening to the rain on the porch roof outside his window, he wondered how long that rooster would keep him from seeing the little pigs and playing in the haymow. His wondering brought no solution . . . only sleep.

It rained for two days, and Jimmy couldn't go out. He sat near the window with his nose pressed against the cool pane and watched the rain come down in gray sheets. The water ran from the roofs and dripped from the trees and splashed from the leaden sky to form little rivulets that ran down through the barnyard. The cats sat in the doorway to the barn, licked their paws, and looked unconcerned while the chickens sat huddled like vultures under the dripping trees. Jimmy watched a big chicken haltingly walk across the muddy barnyard. He brightened and looked again. Sure enough, it was the rooster . . . but look at him, he's all wet. His feathers are all soaked and dirty gray, and his long tail feathers are drooping . . . almost dragging in the mud.

"He sure doesn't look so feisty now," Jimmy thought. "He's just like any ol' chicken," he said as he straightened up on his chair. "I'll show him who's boss," the little boy puffed out his chest. "I'll go out looking for him tomorrow."

The next morning the sun shone bright and hot, and the puddles began to shrink. Jimmy and his father sat at the table eating breakfast. "Mommy, can I have some more scrambled eggs?" he asked.

Carol Archer cast a surprised glance at her husband. "Of course, Jimmy," she gave him a second helping.

"Uh . . . what are you going to do today, son?" asked Mr. Archer. The little boy's mouth was full; he just shrugged his shoulders and grabbed a second piece of toast. When he finished, he slid off his chair and trotted outside.

The barnyard was just beginning to show drying spots. Jimmy looked around; all the chickens that he could see were in the edge of the alfalfa field beyond the barn . . . they were looking for grasshoppers. He picked his way from one dry spot to the next till he got to the haymow. No rooster in sight. The little boy played with the kittens and climbed the ladder at the end of the haymow to rob the pigeons' nests. There was a hole in the wall for the hay rope

way up under the peak of the roof, and Jimmy could see the stark white chickens foraging in the lush green hay field below. There he was. The rooster was the farthest out of all. Jimmy thought he would wait till a little later to show him who was boss.

The morning went quickly; Mr. Archer went to the corncrib and loaded some corn which Jimmy helped him put out in the hog pen for feed. They spilled some along the way near the horse barn, and a few hens began to return from the hayfield. But it was noon now, and Jimmy with his father went to the house for lunch.

The little boy stood next to a doorjamb that had pencil marks on it at various intervals. "Mommy, did I grow any?"

"Well, Jimmy, we just measured you last week on your birthday," she said.

"But, I feel taller, Mommy!"

The meal passed quickly and Jimmy again set out on his hunt. "But first, I'll go see the little pigs," he thought. As he rounded the corner of the corncrib, he saw some chickens pecking at the spilled corn.

There was the rooster. Jimmy stopped dead still . . . he didn't feel as brave as he had felt yesterday when it was raining and the rooster looked so bedraggled. The rooster was clean and white now; his long, slender tail feathers made graceful arcs in the air. Jimmy froze. The rooster seemed not to see him. Then the bird stopped midway in a thrust after a kernel of corn and his head bobbed up in a cocked position . . . he had seen Jimmy. The rooster ruffled his feathers and shook himself. Jimmy didn't move. The bird studied him with one eye, momentarily; he lowered one wing, half strutted and half ran in a small semicircle, then stopped to ruffle his feathers again. Jimmy still didn't move, but he could hear the tractor motor starting behind the barn. "I don't want Daddy to see me run from a rooster," he thought. His hope was that the tractor wouldn't come around to the corncrib. The rooster stood facing Jimmy now with his head cocked to one side so that one eye could fully watch the little boy. Then his neck feathers stood straight out like a partially raised collar . . . he flared out both wings and came after Jimmy.

The frightened boy turned on his heels to flee around the corner when he heard the tractor start toward him from around the barn. He could hear the flopping wings and patting feet behind him. He couldn't bear to acknowledge defeat in the sight of his father . . . Jimmy tried to turn a half circle to go back the other way and at the same time avoid his pursuer.

But he failed; the rooster ran right into Jimmy's churning legs. A funny thing happened then . . . the rooster let out a loud squawk and began to retreat. The little boy stopped momentarily out of surprise, and then he took off in pursuit.

Jimmy's father was astonished to see a rooster come running pell mell around the corner of the barn, and flabbergasted to see Jimmy, close behind, flinging rocks and bits of sodden dirt after the retreating bird.

A look of triumph was in the little boy's eyes as he stopped to tell his father how he had stalked the feisty rooster and shown him who was boss. "Well, I think I'll go see the little pigs now," he said.

"Don't bother that sow, son. She might chase you," warned Mr. Archer. "She won't bother *me*," said Jimmy as he defiantly marched off toward the pig pen.

The old white sow with her litter of seven lay in the corner of the hog pasture beneath a walnut tree. Jimmy came strutting down across the pasture throwing rocks and sticks at every available target. He was trying to whistle.

The old sow flopped an ear over her narrow slit-like eye and grunted as the boy approached. The little pigs curiously advanced toward the stranger.

"And the first thing I knew, Jimmy came around the corner chasing that old feisty rooster," said Mr. Archer to his wife where they stood near the porch. "I'll bet he'll be chasing every animal on the place, for a week or two," he laughed. Just then both parents caught sight of their son running toward the hog pasture gate; the old white sow was close behind. As the boy scrambled hurriedly over the wooden gate, Mr. Archer turned and winked at his wife.