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Music to Soothe the Savage Chicken

When Gene and Barbara asked me to feed their chickens while they vacationed, I said I'd be glad to. I felt confident that I knew everything there was to know about chickens. After all, I was a ranch woman now, wasn't I? We didn't have chickens ourselves, but I didn't think that was a problem. I'd visited my grandma's when I was three, four, and five years old, in the Ozarks, before we moved to California, and she was a chicken expert. I'd watched her feed them, gather the eggs, and even prepare them for Sunday dinner, and I'd had a pet rooster of my own at home. I was on intimate terms with this rooster. He was gorgeous in his coat of many colors, and I petted him whenever I could catch him.

He and our old hound dog, Major, were my back step companions. I shared my ice cream cones with my friendly hound, and he was very polite about it. He took one lick at a time and courteously waited while I took mine. Since he was twice as big as I was, this was a true test of manners.

So when I was asked to feed Gene and Barbara's chickens, I felt competent and informed. Never mind that there had been an interim of many years between my early Arkansas experience and this present Oregon adventure. These early experiences have a way of getting into your blood. They stamp you just as clearly as my grandma's butter mold stamped the busy little bee on the butter she churned.

The day before they left, I went down for final instructions on quantity of food for chickens, dogs and goats, and special milking procedures my neighbors followed, which were somewhat different

from my own. I was cocky- trying-to-be-receptive and Gene fixed me with an uncertain eye. "Got it?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure," I replied. This was something a three-year-old could walk through, right? "Have a good time."

"Thanks. See you in about a week."

Next morning's sun rise was spectacular. I milked my own lone goat after breakfast and headed down the road. Everything went well through the goats, the dogs and the barn cats, although I thought their goats were definitely more reticent about giving milk than my own "Jewel," who was a diamond among goats, even though she did feast on my iris just as they were beginning to bloom.

I approached the chicken house with a confidence which dwindled quickly as soon as I entered. Somehow the atmosphere had been different when I was in there with Gene. Today twenty or thirty chickens pinned me to the wall with baleful stares. I remembered that Gene had mentioned that some of the hens were "broody," definitely not happy about anyone being in the chicken house with them, particularly if that someone wanted to gather their eggs. The roosters looked ready to challenge my impudent intrusion into their domain, and began to sidle toward me, clucking as they advanced. I did a quick, two step feeding procedure and left.

Who would have guessed that simple old chickens could be so threatening, I thought, as I hurried up the road. Of course I did remember, now that I thought of it, that my "pet" rooster in Arkansas had spurred me just above the eye one day, suddenly fed up with my gentle but persistent attentions. My dad had "fixed his wagon," an article which we had fried that night. I refused to eat any of it because he'd been my friend. I also held no animosity

towards him, but perhaps his relatives had heard of his wagon and our treatment of it.

The next morning, I finished the milking with dispatch, but my steps slowed as I wandered toward the chicken house. I wondered how long chickens could survive without food and water, but a sense of responsibility propelled me toward the door.

I peeked in, and heads swiveled at my entrance. An ominous clucking began. Every chicken seemed to have something to say about my insolent behavior. I shrank along the wall toward the feed as they advanced. I wondered why I'd ever agreed to be a good neighbor. I pondered peace-making techniques in a corner, thinking that surely we could come to an understanding. "Were there any arbitration possibilities with a group of chickens?" was the question uppermost in my mind.

Sometimes, at desperate moments, an old adage contains more wisdom than one might have suspected. Would they like music with their meal, I wondered, remembering "music to soothe the savage beast, or breast," I couldn't remember which, but now wasn't the time to waver over literary distinctions. "Oh what a beautiful morning," I burst forth vivaciously as I dished out corn. "Oh, what a beautiful day!" Clucking ceased as I continued earnestly, reaching for the water. "I've got a beautiful feeling! Everything's going my way..." Heads cocked first to one side, then the other. A broody hen closed her eyes. By the time I got around to "the corn is as high as an elephant's eye," I had the audience of my dreams.

I had no trouble with them after that. In fact, they seemed to wait expectantly each morning to see what was on the program for the day. I ran through my repertoire, but the one that seemed to satisfy them most was the one about the corn on a bright morning.

I was kind of sorry when Gene and Barbara came home. It ended my stage career and a growing rapport with my audience.